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The VICTVS Podcast: Revision Notes - December

Katherine

Hello and welcome to The VICTVS podcast. My name is Katherine Barnett and I will be your host today and in this episode, we will be discussing some of the year's key themes, as well as some of our favourite news stories. To help us with this episode, we have our special guest, Geoff Chapman, here today. Geoff is a management consultant and specialist in global technology services within educational assessment.

He also runs a blog which covers key developments in EdTech, which we will be linking to in the show notes. He's also previously appeared in the fourth episode of The VICTVS Podcast, which we'll also be linking to, and you should definitely go and watch that. Geoff, it's great to have you back here with us today.

Geoff

Hi, Katherine.

Thanks for inviting me back. Great to be here.

Katherine

Okay, Geoff let's get into our first key theme, which I know that you're excited to talk about. And this is the push back against exam digitalisation. So back in March, Ofqual's Sir Ian Bauckham boldly claimed to TES magazine that when it came to digital exams, "we discard pen and paper exams at our peril."

He said "you can't hack into a piece of paper on an exam. I think that very tried and tested way of taking exams is something that we discard at our peril, and we certainly won't be doing that on my watch." Very strong words. In November, he also spoke on this at the schools and academia, Academies show in Birmingham, highlighting the digital divide and the need to make sure certain students aren't disadvantaged in the move to digital exams and learning.

So please, please share your thoughts on this. I know you have a lot to say.

Geoff

Absolutely. A lot to unpack. It's been a quite, quite an interesting time this year unpicking and unpacking what the regulator has had to say about digital exams, particularly in schools. We shouldn't forget that the regulator has to tread a very fine line in terms of who their audience is.

And not forgetting, obviously, from a sector perspective, from supply perspective, we can be quite, cynical or a downer on the regulator, we always have to remember their audience as well. You have a lot of educators, you have a lot of head teachers that don't have the visibility or the vista, if you like, of digital exams that they, that their day to day is all around teaching, making sure that the school is running properly.

Children get what, what they need and the support that they need. They're not too concerned about what else happens outside of school and the parameters of not just, Ofqual but Ofsted and everything else. So, I do have some sympathy for the regulator in managing expectations but also making sure that they're not throwing oil on the flames as well.

Obviously on social media you do get more robust debate. You get a lot more, how can I put this, more combative discussion around digital exams. I think that's healthy! I think that's, I'd rather people were engaged rather than not engaged and what I'd like to see more of is the regulator talking more about what, what what's been going over the last 20 years.

And one thing I think the regulator could do a better job with and the sector and trade bodies as well, should do a better job with, is articulating the benefits. I still don't think we as a, as a sector have really got those distilled down properly yet. Because there, there are plenty of benefits. I won't bore you too much with that today.

ut it would be nice if those key benefits could be repeated, that they could be, pushed a lot harder and lobbied. And that would give, I think, not just Ofqual but other regulators to, to say, yes, actually, we have been doing this for quite a while, and we've been doing it at scale and a lot of the methods are proven, and a lot of the uncertainty and scare stories can be debunked now.

And I think that's important to try and debunk a lot of the misinformation that's out there. Again, we'll probably come to this in a later story, but the regulator needs to understand that they themselves, in a different guise, did a lot of pioneering work 20 years ago in England. And I think it's, it would be good for them to reflect on that in the public domain to say, yes, we already trialled this in certain situations.

We've already done a lot of piloting. Let's have a look at what we did, perhaps that might help when we move to the next phase. So yeah, I do have some sympathy with the with the regulator. But yeah, it's up to all of us in the sector to really give them the ammunition to, 'ammunition' is probably not the right word, I'm going back to the combative, piece again, but, you know, give them the insights, give them the visibility of what, what is currently possible.

And indeed, we've been doing for many a year.

Katherine
Yeah. Some very good points that I think that, this always happens with emerging technologies and technology being introduced into other spheres, but there's so much fear mongering, and I think it would be good for people to have a more balanced, balanced discussion and definitely a more balanced perspective presented to them in, in the media about the benefits of these things, especially when, as you said, these things have already been done and trialled, with certain exams.

So I think it would be good to discuss the benefits of those and not shy away from that rather than, just incessant fear mongering I don't think is helpful.

Geoff
Absolutely. And it's, it's an interesting point around where else it does work. And yes, the sector can talk very well around different sectors of where exams are delivered.

So with us in that professional licensure or its financial services or wherever it is, but those stories have been there for a long, long time now, we're getting on for three decades for that, and not just in terms of paper behind glass, you know, digitalisation of analogue scripts, but also oral spoken oral heard, portfolio work.

All those assessment instruments are being used now at scale, and it would be good for the regulator and others to, yeah, just open up the box a little bit on that. I think there's a lot that's still not been discussed. And the UK especially does really, really well. This isn't the case of, yes, Portugal have already digitised, or New Zealand have already digitised school exams.

Actually, there's a lot of great work in the UK that again, is not being talked about.

Katherine
Yeah, definitely it would be good to hear more about that.

Let's go on to a slightly more bizarre news story, but one which I like and I know we discussed in the office as well. So there was the publication and then consequent reduction of a study on exam ceiling height and its impact on exam results, which was just very strange to read about.

I read the redaction first and then had to work backwards. It was very strange. So in September, an article in The Conversation was published which claimed that high ceilings and exam halls are associated with a lower exam score from candidates. And then following a query from a reader, the authors of this study reviewed their calculations and basically realised that they were wrong.

And the results were a lot more nuanced than originally believed. So then The Conversation had to basically issue a redaction and an apology for publishing it in the first place. Yeah, it was a bit of a mess, really. Again, would you like to share your thoughts on this?

Geoff
Yeah. It's, it's a shame because, particularly in education, you are looking for reliable, highly cited research to back up what you're saying.

And the whole comparison between analogue paper and digital, there's not a ton of research out there, but there is some, which I think is encouraging. One thing that does disappoint me around research is where you have organisations that are able to fund a lot of research into the status quo, where they are able to say, "yes, the use of essays is a, is a strong assessment instrument."

And that is compared to other areas in the vocational space where those guys, those organisations who support the vocational sector, either don't have it in their mission to fund research, or they're not able to afford that research because, you know, good quality research is not just labour intensive, but it does cost money to do right. I'm not sure what happened here, whether it was a lack of resourcing or focus or perhaps the, whoever signed it off didn't bother reading it properly, perhaps put through ChatGPT.

Who knows? But I think that the premise of understanding the service encounter, sorry that phrase comes from retail. But the service encounter of somebody who is experiencing high stakes exam or any type of assessments, what does that actually look like, and what are the factors that are going to affect that delivery and affect them as a person?

How they're able to perform on the day or through a, through a series. So I think there's something in this, around the location because especially after the pandemic, you'll know as well as I do that movement towards remote proctoring, where a learner has to, you know, basically create their own exam room. That is a service encounter which is completely new.

You know, it was completely new. Before the pandemic, remote proctoring was almost an edge case. It was something which, you know, e-assessment or computer testing nerds like me would be aware of and done some projects on. But to talk a learner through what it means to prepare their own exam room, to talk to educators about what that means as well, compared to the 'turn up at a venue, sit down, and then everything's going to be laid on for you.'

You know, 'you'll be given the pieces of paper and maybe a pen if you're polite' to basically strip your whole exam room and make sure that the tech works, again, much of the sector a fantastic job in doing that. The tech yeah, is pretty robust now and it does what it does. But the whole service encounter and in terms of educating, educating people to understand why it's different and why, not just the benefits of it, but what it means for you in your own personal circumstance.

So somebody who is unable to travel to a centre because it's in a different country or it's an hour flight or whatever it might be, that situation really works for them to, to have the exam in their own home. But by the same token, other people who may be in a house of multiple occupancy, yeah, those guys don't have the privilege of having a quiet room.

You know, they could be in shared accommodation, it's noisy there's a lot going on. Yeah, you're not able to do that. So having research like this which talks about the impact of the venue, not just the exam centre but their own room, there's something in this. But yeah, better luck next time.

Katherine
Yeah. The, the, the interesting...There would have been an interesting thread basically behind the research if it hadn't been lost in the confusion, confusion surrounding the research itself, which is a shame. Because thinking about it, would I be more anxious in a room with very high ceilings? Maybe. It's quite an imposing atmosphere, I guess hopefully we'll find out at some point whether that does impact if they do the research again

And get better results. I don't know, but I think it would be more interesting to, it would be interesting to, to look at the impact the environment does have on people taking exams. So hopefully we have more, accurate insight on this soon.

Geoff

There's a lot of data out there. There's a lot of data that companies, the sector captures in terms of, you know, the right temperature, you know, the spacing between desks, humidity, the light as well coming in. Yeah, there is lot of data that's captured by, by the supply, supply chain for this, some exam owners do request this, some aren't as bothered. So it's not as though we're going into the unknown here, a lot of this data is out there. Wouldn't it be great if the academic side and the supply sidecould actually meet and share ideas and share data? Now, wouldn't that be a thing?

Katherine
That would be a wonderful thing.

Okay, so our next story today, is around the rise in SEN accommodation requests as reported by new government data. So in July, the government published new data on special education needs and disabilities in England. It showed that there are now almost 1.7 million students with SEN in England's schools.

Since 2015, the number of young people with EHC plans or a SEN statement has increased by 139%. So that's by 335,780, and among pupils aged 5 to 15 there's been an increase of 192,389, which is 95%, so that's absolutely massive. Yes, again, would love to hear your thoughts on this Geoff.

Geoff
Yeah, it's a real latent issue.

Again, societal understanding of a lot of neurosciences has changed and evolved, even, you know, very, very recently, so not just within schools but in other areas where SEN diagnoses and plans are put in place. Yeah, it's great that we've got that awareness now and I don't think that's going to decrease. We're only going to get more understanding of what that means. In terms of our sector,

I think it's great that we are in a position, especially on the digital side of things, where we're able to offer a lot more accommodations than perhaps the, you know, the paper analogue variety can offer. I think that's a wonderful thing in many different guises. Not just in terms of what some learner or candidates can declare upfront, to, to let people know "I'll need a certain accommodation", but also an on the day request as well.

And again, I think digital has a distinct advantage there in terms of that on-the-fly decision making.

Katherine

Definitely.

Geoff

So I think there's a lot of positives we can take from that. The negatives, or one of the negatives here, is the real pressure on educators, on exam officer staff, a lot of people who have processes, procedures, work instructions, buildings that are set up for an analogue situation maybe 30 years ago, maybe a bit more.

We are starting to get stories that, there was one from a college in the summer where they had to basically closedown any sort of teaching in order to deliver exams because of the extra SEN requirements. That really worries me. That is not going to go away and it's not going to shrink. Now, if you're starting to displace, regular learning and teaching because of exam delivery, we've got an issue. Now, if a certain group of parents uncover that and say, well, "why is our learning stopping by our kids learning stopping because of the exam delivery?"

I think some people will start to question that. Now, this isn't just a state versus fee paying piece at all, it's not about "we pay this, we want learning." It's more around, "This is the regular schedule. Why aren't you providing something for exams and for the SEN learners?" So I think the sector, the supply sector, could do a better job in articulating what we can offer in terms of not just SEN provision, but extra capacity as well.

So there will be places that are geographically challenging, you know, schools in rural places, for example. Yeah, they will struggle to find, capacity basically. Now, wouldn't it be great if the sector could say "we already do this"? We can already provide, dare I say, perhaps to a higher standard of invigilation or proctoring because it's what we do every day.

This is what we do as a, this is our job. So, I think my call to the sector would be, talk about what you can offer in terms of capacity. And if we can get that message across to schools, I think that'll be really helpful to, not solve the issue, but I think it's going to buy us some time.

And I think it's really important that we buy some time given the, the digitisation path that a lot of the, the, the general qualifications awarding bodies have talked about, but also that the others in them, in delivering exams, buys them some time so that they can adjust those processes, that they can start to talk in a more positive way about how they can accommodate SEN learners, which I don't think we're doing at the moment.

It does seem to be an undercurrent in some of these stories around, yeah, it's causing a lot of pain, and it shouldn't be. It shouldn't be a pain to be educated or, or to take an exam. Of course, exams aren't the thing that everybody loves to do, but wouldn't it be great if we could just make it a bit more comfortable and enable people to perform the best they can, rather than worried about being in a suboptimal space?

And also, you know, if you've got siblings in in the lower years and you're getting it in the neck over, over the evening meal around, "well, I had PE cancelled because you lot were in the sports hall doing exams". So there's, there's a lot of upside to using what the what the suppliers can offer right now. And I think we can do a better job in doing that.

But also letting the regulator, and also anybody in government, know that these solutions are there, we're waiting. On a slightly different angle as well, when we look at a lot of the empty buildings around, especially in urban locations, every council in England has a list of buildings that are empty. I'm not sure it's beyond the wit of man and some shop outfitters to say, wouldn't it be great if we could talk to local schools and the supply community in, could be based testing, could we fit something out? Couldn't we actually supply something which is local? And also we're keeping the high street going as well? You're going to get that through and have a space which is specially designed, for exam delivery.

And it's configurable. So again, a lot of those solutions are there, the data is there. We just need to be better as a sector in articulating those.

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Katherine

Yes, definitely. I mean I love the idea of using buildings which are already empty and fitting them for, for a really great purpose. If only we could make everybody do that.

It would be really wonderful.

Geoff

Absolutely.

Katherine

I definitely think there's an answer for everyone here where we can be really inclusive and help those students with those requests, as well as still being able to facilitate the needs of other students. There is absolutely a balance there that we can get. I think, as you said, it just involves, I think work from everybody and using the things that we already know are possible, and the supplies that are already there. Yeah. It'll be interesting to see what kind of happens there next year, I think.

Geoff

Yeah, schools and teachers are under so much pressure. Anyway. Wouldn't it be great if we could offer this as a bundled solution, that you could use in so many towns and cities as well?

It's, it's almost sitting up and begging for someone to say, yeah, yeah, we're here, we're waiting for you. And we could get a lot of those problems off your back. And as I said before, buy us some time.

Katherine

Our final news story today, which again, was a slightly humorous piece for me, I think.

So this was a news piece published by the BBC where an invigilator claims she's only caught three exam cheats in 25 years. Another very bold claim. So, Dr Laird, I'm sorry if I'm pronouncing your name wrong, has been the chief invigilator at Portobello High School in Edinburgh, and worked there as an invigilator for 25 years.

She claimed in this BBC article back in May to have only caught three exam cheats 25 years. She mentioned here somebody looking up a lot of words in a dictionary starting with A or B as one of the cheats that she saw. And then somebody else she mentioned had a mobile phone in their pocket. So those were two of the incidences that she was cited.

I have lots to say on this. Please, please go first.

Geoff

I think it's a good thing that, I mentioned before about the pandemic creating remote invigilation and remote proctoring as a viable solution. But what it also did was that it helped to codify the role of the invigilator, and it helped to, it enabled people to understand how important that role is and why it's important as well.

So, there are some organisations which will provide guidelines, they'll say invigilators should do this, that and the other. I've written before about how the professionalisation of invigilation is something we need to latch onto. If we are putting a lot of trust and currency in high stakes assessments, we need the, you know, the suppliers, the solutions, the teams and the invigilators that match that.

What we don't want is somebody, we don't just want a warm body who is getting their petrol money paid. Yeah, I think it's really important that the professionalisation and the codification of invigilation is, is, is talked about a lot more. A lot of companies such as VICTVS can talk about invigilation as a, as a career path for some people.

And I think that's a really good thing to have, because there are a number of different things that an invigilator can do. And the importance of that role in helping people perform to the best of their ability as well, this isn't just about, scolding somebody because they've dropped a piece of paper or, or whatever it is, or smeared something on their, on their laptop screen.

Again, having those professional people who've been trained properly that understand evolving social norms, they understand different cultures, how to interact with people of different ages and different outlooks on life. I think that's, I think that's a really great thing that we need to be talking more about because any assessment that's, that's worth anything has to be supervised.

So we might think that is an invigilator, but it could be a PhD supervisor, or it could be somebody running a practical, in the field examination. If it's worth something, it's got to be supervised. So when somebody says that they've only caught 3 in 25 years, that's a red flag to me. Wouldn't it be great if this particular person talked about how Invigilation has changed over the last 25 years or evolved, ostensibly we're not still talking about somebody who walks up and down with, with creaky shoes on a, on a dusty floor handing out extra pieces of paper.

This is somebody who understands customer service, understands how to anticipate problems. Now, this person may be really great at anticipating problems, but we don't know that. So the whole codification piece, and with remote legislation as well, means that we've got the data to back up our decision making. I think it's really interesting that, again, post-pandemic, people start to talk about, well, if we can train somebody in those facets, does it really matter where they are?

I think that's an important discussion to have as well. If somebody is running a session in Sheffield, does it matter if the remote invigilator is in Dundee, as an example. So it's not about replacing one for another. And I don't think this person should be fearful about losing their job. But wouldn't it be great to have a exemplars or good practice, or even have somebody operating out in Dundee who could support what you're doing in Edinburgh and vice versa?

And having that...I think what we're trying to say is, is this the norm? It probably isn't, but wouldn't it be great to talk about what's normal, wouldn't it be great to talk about good practice. And again, I think this is what the the red flag to me is. It's not sure if this is good practice or not.

Katherine
Yes.

So something that I think was missing from that BBC news piece, as you have mentioned I think as well, is talking about Invigilators and referring to it as a proper profession, rather than this outdated view of it just being, I don't know, it used to be, I remember my mum invigilated very randomly on some occasions, and that was not her job.

It was just something that she did. And that's how I maybe used to view it. And now working at VICTVS, obviously we have amazing professional invigilators. I've also invigilated myself and had that first-hand experience. So I do think that there should have been more written in this article about the profession and, and made it into, made it seem like a more serious thing, because it is.

And I think that people need to, to understand that really. And yeah, I don't think, I think it's, I think it's crazy that someone would only spot three instances of cheating in 25 years because even in one exam that I invigilated the other day, there were two instances. One, someone had their phone on the desk, so that's already ticked off one that she said happened in the last 25 years. And somebody also had too many notes, so that's two instances. And that was one exam. So it seems completely ludicrous to me that, that, that this would be accurate, this news piece.

So, yes, there's definitely more to be said there. I know our invigilators go through so much training and they work so hard and have such that, we, we all have a checklist of things that we need to, keep an eye on during exams and be vigilant of.

So this person could be an, an amazing invigilator, we don't know, but, yeah, I think that maybe this article did a slight disservice to people who do it professionally maybe.

Geoff
Where it gets really interesting for me is, is the old adage around, digital is always held to a higher standard than analogue, than, than the status quo.

And digital uncovers a lot of poor practice. You're able to audit every single part of what happens within an exam, right from blueprinting and creating it, right through to the analysis of how the exam was performed and how candidates performed and everything else. And that makes some people really uncomfortable. And when you read a story about the old traditional analogue experience and only catching three in 25 years, and then you've related your experience around seeing malpractice or not being able to anticipate malpractice in such a small window.

I think that's one of the wonders of digital and digital delivery, being able to, not just, replicate what goes on in the analogue space, but really put a nice, tight focus on that service encounter to really understand what's going on. And also as well, it's it reflects back to the learners, to the candidates to say, "we're taking this seriously." "Are you taking it seriously?" So that cultural change, I think it's still very fluid. I don't think we're quite there yet. But, yeah, invigilation is starting to become more professionalised because data is, digital has enabled that. And I think it's great that we're being held or digital is being held to a much higher standard because it starts to shine a very harsh light on suboptimal practices, as we've seen.

Katherine
I would love to hear more about your thoughts for 2025. So do you have any predictions on what we can expect to see dominating the news in the edtech or education and assessment space, I should say, for the next year?

Geoff
Yeah. I'm not, I'm not a futurologist I'm more of a kind of roll the sleeves up and get stuff done sort of person.

But I am seeing some trends out there, so I better to talk to those sort of trends really. I think we talked a lot about SEN learners and their needs. And I think that is one trend that's pretty obvious to everybody. What I think might happen next year is that we'll, we'll get an instant, where there's been inadequate provision for whatever reason.

And there'll be some big news story around the either school or a college or whatever it is that's not been able to provide for a SEN learner. We have seen that in Ireland last year, I was asked to help out with a particular case around the Irish leaving certificates. And a colleague of mine in Dublin really, really helped out a family where a young girl wanted to have a digital version of a leaving certificate exam and was refused by the, the exam board and yeah, they had to go legal to get that.

Now, they got a successful outcome, but we shouldn't have to go through that process. Nobody should be felt alone and having to do that and recourse to that. So, I think we'll see other instances of that. And I think probably a major one because of the bigger demand that we talked about before, the the stress that a lot of the schools and the colleges and, and the teachers are under in, in providing, for SEN learners.

So, yeah, the first prediction if you will, is that I think we'll probably see a major incident because of the huge growth.

Katherine

Yeah. I would not be surprised at all if we saw that either. I would also like to know what you would like to see happening in the education and assessment space.

Geoff
Absolutely. I've talked at length about recognition of our sector.

Some, some people have worked in the sector a lot longer than I have, in the digital arena, you know, delivering high stakes digital assessment at scale, portfolio, all the different instruments that have been digitised in that time and we've seen so many examples, outside the UK as well. Now, the sector is still being, the digital sector is still being treated as a disruptive child.

It's still being treated as though, shut up, go to your room and leave the quote unquote "adults" to deal with this in the way that we used to. So those stories and those advocacies and all that good news that we've been doing for all this length of time, for some reason, doesn't seem to, to reach the parts that it should.

Now, I think that's not the fault of the people who should be listening, who aren't listening. I think it's the job of trade bodies, the suppliers and the learners as well. I think the learners play a part in this to recognise that the solutions are there. Some good practice I am seeing for learner forums I think will impact, 1 or 2 of the larger, England exam owners already have learner forums, where essentially they're asking them "how should we be doing this?"

"What is it you're looking for?" Because we shouldn't be doing assessment to people really, you need to involve the people who are being assessed, and that's the learners. This shouldn't be a top-down thing. Notwithstanding the the currency of the qualification or the security of, of delivery or anything like that, but you need to involve, in any situation, need to involve the people, the stakeholders if you will, who we are actually involving here.

So I'm really encouraged that some examiners are putting resource into getting those learners together on a scheduled regular basis and talking through assessments. I'm really, really pleased to see that. I wish it was something that was mandated by the regulator.

Katherine
Okay. Finally, Geoff, do you have any closing thoughts for us today?

Geoff
I think it's a really interesting moment.

In the assessment sector. When you look at what the UK government is trying to do, especially in England, in terms of education, I really like what they've tried to do with Professor Becky Francis and her review of assessments and curriculum. That will report next year. I know that a number of trade bodies and a number of suppliers have, submitted evidence to that review, and I think that's, I think that's terrific.

What I'd like to see is the review to talk about a roadmap for digitisation. We've had that from some of the exam owners and some of the suppliers, but I think the review will be good to put a lot more colour around that roadmap and what it looks like in all the different facets and varieties of assessments.

What I don't want to see is the review to hide behind, oh "we can't do it because not everybody has a tablet computer, or "we can't do because we need to run training courses for everybody" or, or "we can't do it because there's not enough money", it starts to get a little bit embarrassing when you see how well the countries have digitised school assessment and how other sectors do it as well.

So I think if the review can talk about how it's already been done and what levers could be pulled in terms of government policy to make that happen, I think that'll be really, really beneficial. I think the call out for evidence has

worked well from what I hear from the industry, they've run some really great workshops in different schools over the last couple of months.

And again, I think it's great that people do have the opportunity to talk about what's on their mind in terms of assessments, I know I certainly did. But to really get that whole picture around how digital is helping learners throughout the world and in different sectors as well, we're not scrabbling around for answers here, the answers are already here and I think that's, we need to take advantage of that.

Thank you so much Geoff for joining us today. It's been really great to have you here and talk with you. So, yeah, thank you so much.

Geoff
Thank you, Katherine, great to be back.

Katherine
If you'd like to read some of Geoff's work, you can visit his website, geoffchapman.com, where he posts regular blogs about the industry.

And you can also see him in the fourth episode of the VICTVS Podcast. He's also on Bluesky and LinkedIn, and we'll link to these in the show notes as well as all of the new stories discussed in today's episode. Thank you to our listeners once again for tuning in today. We hope you enjoyed this year in review episode of The VICTVS Podcast.

If you've got any thoughts that you wish to share on anything we've discussed today, please drop them in the comments on our socials and make sure to check out all of our other podcast episodes as well. For more information about VICTVS and what we do in the academic and exam industries, you can visit www.VICTVS.co.uk.

And finally, from all of us at VICTVS we wish you a merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

Sources:

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The Conversation - Retraction: why we removed an article about a link between exam results and ceiling height

FFT Education Data Lab - The rise and rise of Education, Health and Care Plans

BBC - I've only caught three exam cheats in 25 years