

Article:	Warning Bells Ring on Fake Degrees
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Market proliferating for 'life experience' qualifications

For business school graduates, receiving a degree certificate is the culmination of years of hard work and dedication. Yet thousands of people manage to obtain certificates without ever attending a class, sitting an exam or even opening a text book.

The market for fake degrees is huge. Advertising their offerings through newspaper advertisements and the Internet, so-called degree mills promise a range of academic achievements to anyone prepared to pay for them.

The degrees come in two types -- those made to look like they have been issued by a legitimate university or business school, and those offered by "non-accredited" universities.

Many non-accredited schools go to great lengths to make themselves appear as legitimate as possible. They create sophisticated Web sites giving detailed descriptions of staff and courses on offer, and provide contact phone numbers and legitimate addresses.

However those wishing to obtain a degree from them need offer nothing more than some background details about themselves -- and a cheque. The schools argue their degrees are awarded for "life experience" and so students are not required to undertake any formal study or examinations.

Employers are becoming increasingly concerned about the proliferation of fake degrees and qualifications in the marketplace. As well as the costs associated with hiring someone who does not actually have the qualifications they state, a firm could also leave itself open to legal action should any mistakes be made by the staff member.

According to the United States Federal Trade Commission, it can sometimes be difficult to identify fake qualifications. However there are certain warning signs that potential employers should watch for.

These include being wary of degrees that have been earned out of sequence or more quickly than would normally be the case. For example, if a person has a master's degree but no bachelor's degree, alarm bells should ring. Employers should also check the credentials of any schools with which they are not familiar.

The FTC also warns against relying on Web site details and suggests checking directly with the school itself when trying to confirm whether a particular person actually studied there.

Officials in the U.S. state of Oregon have taken extra steps to counter the fake degree problem, establishing the Office of Degree Authorisation. The ODA maintains lists of accredited academic institutions which will be recognized by government and private-sector employers in the state.

Oregon's efforts follow an earlier national approach to the problem. During the 1980s the Federal Bureau of Investigation established a task force, called DipScam, designed to look into the spread of fake degrees and close down as many illegitimate schools as possible.

While it was successful during its tenure, the task force was closed in 1991 when its head, Allen Ezell, resigned. Ezell subsequently wrote a book on the problem called "Degree Mills: the billion



dollar industry". He estimates tens of thousands of fake qualifications are generated each year, and the problem is likely to get worse because of the increasing demands of business for qualified candidates.

Others warn that it's not a problem unique to the United States. In September this year a Hong Kong woman was sentenced to 12 months jail for using fake degrees to secure employment with a local company.

At a hearing in the Hong Kong District Court, the Police Commercial Crime Bureau said the woman had used degree certificates obtained from two universities in Singapore and one in the United States.

Meanwhile in the United Arab Emirates, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs recently began screening degrees provided by job applicants seeking working visas for the region.

The Ministry has signed a contract with document verification company IntegraScreen which will undertake physical checks on certificates provided as part of the approval process.

While the number of fake degrees on offer shows no sign of dropping, people relying on them to secure employment could find it increasingly difficult. As large companies and government departments become more sophisticated in the way to check background credentials, anyone holding a dubious degree is likely to be caught.