

PROSPECTS

hedd

VERIFICATION + AUTHENTICATION

Office for  
Students 

Advice and  
guidance on  
degree fraud  
for providers

# What happens when someone falsely claims to be a graduate of your university? Degree fraud threatens the reputation and stability of the HE sector, yet the problem is little understood

## What is degree fraud?

Degree fraud is what happens when people benefit by pretending to have a degree-level qualification, whether a Bachelors, Masters or PhD. A degree is a guarantee of three things:

- that a student has completed a course of study
- they have a seal of approval from the university
- they have achieved a certain grade.

When a student pays to study at a recognised university, they can be sure that they will be properly prepared for the world of work. A student with a degree from an unrecognised provider, or worse no education at all, does not hold the same guarantee of quality. Instead of being a physical symbol of knowledge, a degree becomes a useless piece of paper.

## CASE STUDY

After embezzling money into fictitious bank accounts, a top NHS boss was found to have lied about having a Masters, PhD and military background. He was ordered to pay back £300,000 by the courts.



# How does degree fraud affect institutions?

Despite the fact that the majority of degree fraud takes place off campus, institutions are still affected. Here's how:

## CASE STUDY

A top engineer in South Africa's public rail organisation was discovered to have a fake Masters and PhD after he purchased 13 trains at a cost of £26 million. The problem was that they were 4mm too tall for safety regulations. Overall, the taxpayer lost £386 million as a result of hiring the wrong person.

- **Reputational damage** – If a fraudster's claim to have studied with you goes unchallenged, it will be taken as a reflection of your teaching ability rather than the fraudster's lies.
- **IP theft** – In order to create convincing counterfeits, fraudsters try to gain as many templates as possible. This includes official documents and may mean fraudsters are able to create convincing supplementary documents to support the lie.
- **Undermining students** – As an institution, you want your students to succeed. When they enter the workplace and are treated the same as people with worthless qualifications, the value of their education is compromised.
- **Poor performance** – If you hire someone with a fake degree to work at your institution, the knowledge they pass on will not be equivalent to that of someone who studied at an accredited institution.
- **Lower engagement** – Once an employer accepts a fake qualification as an equivalent degree, students are disincentivised from spending time and money at a real institution.
- **Increased demand** – It takes just one person to get hired to fuel the marketing claims of fake degree websites. Other customers then follow suit, driving up sales of counterfeit imitations of your degrees.
- **Compromised grading** – As essay mills can bypass plagiarism checks a student's final grade will not be a reflection of the knowledge gained on the course.
- **Stolen branding** – It's common for fraudsters to set up imitation universities. If this happens, it's your branding, materials and students that will be representing their criminal operation.



# How does degree fraud happen?

## **Fake universities**

As an institution, you are held to certain quality standards to ensure that students are protected. With unrecognised providers, there is no such guarantee. Their courses are made up from whatever material they choose, from any comprehension level and subject matter. Often, their textbooks and educational materials will also be plagiarised.

Fake universities can be original, plausible entities (University of Ridgeshire, etc.) or plagiarised from the branding of existing universities (Newcastle International University, etc.). What unites all of them is that their qualifications are unregulated.

## **Fake certificates**

Safeguards are in place to make sure that degree certificates look official. Watermarks, counterfoils, paper types – these are just some of the ways that universities protect the branding of their degrees. However, fraudsters can and will poach security methods to make counterfeit certificates.

Fake certificates are part of a booming industry. The cheapest can be bought for a few pounds and the most expensive sell for hundreds. Even experienced student records professionals sometimes struggle to distinguish a real degree from a counterfeit – such is the quality of some fake certificates on the market.

### **CASE STUDY**

After falsely claiming to have a law degree, a man was hired by an Australian public health authority in the finance department. He incrementally stole money from the organisation until he attempted to siphon £6 million in one transaction.



Could you tell a fake when it's in front of you?

### Confidence tricks

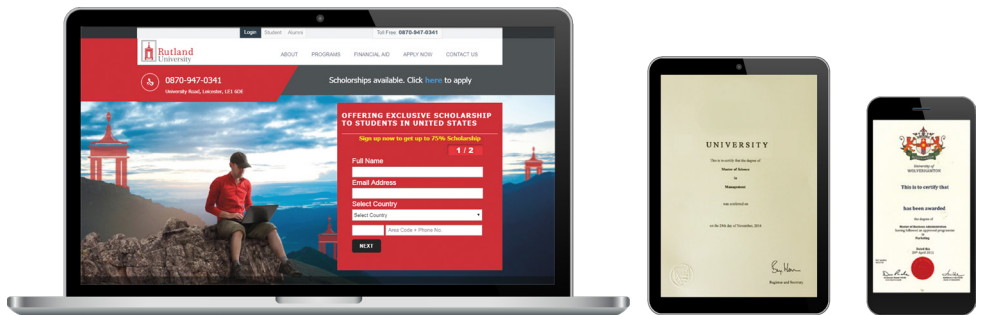
A confidence trick uses no other prop than the candidate's ability to blag. A typical confidence trick relies on the company's lack of safeguards to get a candidate past the interview stage.

An example of this is grade inflation. Grade inflation involves a student or graduate providing a better grade than they achieved, or making up new qualifications to boost their CV. Unless these results are being actively verified against the university, anyone can charm their way into appearing more accomplished than they are.

### Essay mills

In order to protect the integrity of the education system, you'll have plagiarism safeguards in place to ensure students research and submit their own original material. However, a new market has opened up where students commission original essays and submit them as their own work.

If left unchecked, essay mills will turn the education sector into a pay-to-pass scheme, where the student's final grade is not reflective of the knowledge they've gained on the course.



Could you tell a fake when it's in front of you?



# What can be done about degree fraud?

The good news is that degree fraud only thrives when people are careless. The bad news is that we're only at the beginning of raising awareness about it. To eradicate degree fraud completely, we need the support of employers, institutions and students. Here's how your institution can help to solve the problem.

## **Contact Hedd**

Hedd runs the UK's official degree fraud reporting service on behalf of the Office for Students. We follow up reports and investigate degree fraud on an organisational level. This means that we actively work to take down bogus universities and diploma mills. If you're experiencing a degree fraud issue, contact us and we'll do everything within our power to help.

Institutions are most protected against intellectual property theft when they watch out for each other. Always report a degree fraud incident. Standing up for another institution means that others will stand up for you.

## **Consult registers**

Between the Office for Students' register of recognised providers and Hedd's university database, it's possible to check whether an institution's qualifications are recognised. As part of your student on-boarding process, check the name of the institution on the certificate. It could mean the difference between accepting a certificate from The University of Manchester (legitimate) and Manchester University (illegitimate).



Could you tell a fake when it's in front of you?

### Complete rigorous verification checks

An institution is an employer as well as an education provider. Any employee who requires a qualification as part of their role should be verified as standard. On average, the replacement cost of an employee is £30,000 (Oxford Economics 2014), so don't be caught out by failing to verify.

It's not just employees who need to be checked. To gain admission onto a postgraduate course, students need to demonstrate that they have the requisite knowledge to study at an advanced level. However, we've noticed an increased frequency of applicants falsifying qualifications to skip undergraduate study or gain postgraduate funding. Hedd can be used to verify these students just the same as employees.

### Hedd degree fraud checklist:

- ✓ Always check the name of the institution against Hedd's university database.
- ✓ Include consent form for verification as standard during onboarding to dissuade fraudsters.
- ✓ Verify postgraduate applicants using Hedd.
- ✓ Report any instances of confirmed degree fraud to the Hedd degree fraud helpline.
- ✓ Implement a strong degree fraud policy to ensure your institution and students are protected.

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## About Hedd

Prospects Hedd is the UK higher education system's official degree verification service. Established in 2011, Hedd helps protect students, graduates, universities and employers from degree fraud. We do this through secure online verification, as well as providing a central degree fraud reporting service on behalf of the Department for Education.

## About Prospects

Prospects is the UK higher education sector body responsible for student and graduate employability. Prospects invests its profits back into education and research through its parent charity, the Higher Education Careers Services Unit (HECSU).

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