

PROSPECTS

hedd

VERIFICATION + AUTHENTICATION

Office for
Students 

Advice and
guidance on
degree fraud
for employers

When it comes to hiring candidates it pays to be clued up on degree fraud. Taking the time to learn about this type of fraud now could save you hundreds of thousands of pounds in the long run. So what is degree fraud and how does it affect you?

What is degree fraud?


Degree fraud is where people represent themselves as having a degree when they don't – for example, exaggerating or misrepresenting their achievements by inflating their grades or making up work experience.

No matter how insignificant they may seem these lies have serious consequences. As consumers, we place our trust in doctors, accountants or mechanics based on their qualifications. As an employer, your business is built around this same trust; it's therefore important that your customers are confident in your employees' ability to do their jobs.

By studying at university, you can be sure that graduate has gained the knowledge needed to progress in their chosen industry. A student with an education from an unrecognised provider, or worse no education at all, does not hold the same guarantee of quality. Hiring a person like this exposes your company to the risk of internal fraud.

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 me as an employer?

As a business, you'll be no stranger to the benefits of hiring a graduate. However, a return on your investment is dependent on employing the right person. Here's how degree fraud can threaten that:

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.

- **Replacement costs** – Between recruitment, on-boarding and time to reach optimum productivity, hiring the wrong person can be extremely costly and results in unnecessary spending (£30,000 on average – Oxford Economics 2014).
- **Liability risks** – Placing a non-professional in a professional role results in a violation of a duty of care. Your business can suffer the consequences such as litigation and fines.
- **Poor performance** – Hiring someone who has not been genuinely educated in their field will lead to substandard work and inferior productivity.
- **Reputational damage** – If a consumer has a negative experience as a result of an unqualified worker, your company will be known for having compromised quality of service and delivery.
- **Fraud targeting** – Once your organisation has hired someone with a fake degree, you'll gain a reputation for lax processes, making it easier for fraudsters to target you (internally or externally).
- **Low morale** – Genuinely educated employees will question why they work hard only to be paid the same as a colleague who cheated their way into the position.
- **Domino effect** – When one person lies at the interview stage, incentive for honesty collapses. Now everyone deems it okay to lie rather than stand on his or her own merit.
- **Increased demand** – It takes just one person to get hired to fuel the marketing claims of fake degree websites. Other candidates will then follow suit.



How does degree fraud happen?

Fake universities

In the UK, universities are given recognition by the government to award degrees. This carries with it a guarantee that the education offered is regulated to certain quality standards. However, an unrecognised provider will have no such accreditation.

This means that unregulated providers are free to assess their own courses. Where unrecognised providers are primarily designed to return a profit instead of educating students, courses will often be based around plagiarised or abbreviated content in order to minimise overheads and time spent on the course.

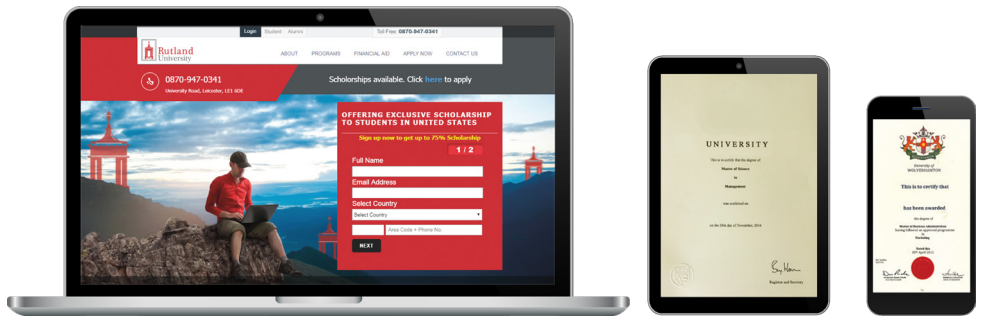
Fake certificates

For the uninitiated, it can be difficult to tell the difference between a real degree and a fake one. Watermarks, holographic foils and quality of paper are all seemingly proof of a real degree, but these are less effective once a fraudster has access to the same technology. Even those who work in student records struggle to tell the difference – UK NARIC recently surveyed student records staff and found that 75% couldn't tell a real degree from a counterfeit.

Fake certificates are part of a booming industry with healthy profit margins – the cheapest can be bought for a few pounds and the most expensive can sell for hundreds. Customers with a pressing need to produce an authentic-looking document will have no issue paying for a fake one – even the most expensive still works out cheaper than a degree.

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 a candidate's ability to blag. A typical confidence trick relies on a company's lack of safeguards to get a candidate past the interview stage.

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


Essay mills

These businesses allow students to commission original essay material while at university. This may not affect you directly as a business, but it's something that will have a damaging effect on the candidate pool.

If candidates pay to pass all their coursework the end result is not indicative of their knowledge. Once you hire a first-class candidate with third-class knowledge credentials become meaningless, as you have no way to gauge their level of understanding.



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, recruiters need to verify the credentials of every candidate. In the meantime, these simple steps can mitigate the effects of degree fraud.

Contact Hedd

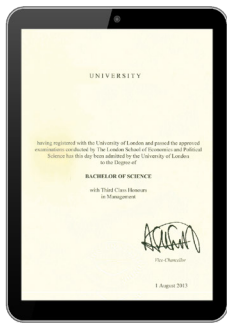
Hedd runs the UK's official degree fraud reporting service on behalf of the Office for Students. We follow up reports and investigate degree fraud on an organisational level. This means that we actively work to take down bogus universities and diploma mills. If you are unsure whether a university is a recognised provider we have information available on the Hedd database for you to search.

While we don't investigate individuals for degree fraud, we can offer advice and guidance on how to deal with a suspected fraudster within your business. If there's a fraudulent website or organisation you've heard of, we'd also like to hear about it.

Consult registers

The Office for Students maintains a register of recognised course providers and the Department for Education maintains a register of listed bodies. In essence, a recognised provider is someone who has approval from the UK government to award degrees. A listed body is an institution that can award a degree in partnership with a recognised provider.

If you're ever unsure about the validity of a provider, you can consult the register or use Hedd's university database. Consulting these registers can mean the difference between accepting a degree from The University of Manchester (legitimate) and one from Manchester University (illegitimate).



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

Complete rigorous verification checks

Degree fraud only succeeds when fraudsters go unchallenged. If every company verifies new candidates every time, then the market and opportunity for fake degrees vanishes.

To let fraudsters know that fake degrees won't be tolerated, check every degree that comes your way. A Hedd verification takes less than five working days to return a result – if you make this the first check you do, you can establish which candidates are truthful before you start the expensive, time-consuming checks.

Hedd degree fraud checklist:

- ✓ Always check the name of the institution against Hedd's university database.
- ✓ Let candidates know in advance that you verify qualifications.
- ✓ Include consent form for verification as standard during onboarding to dissuade fraudsters.
- ✓ Verify the degree directly against student records.
- ✓ Report any instances of confirmed fake degrees to the degree fraud helpline.
- ✓ Know your policy on verification.

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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).

Graduate Prospects Ltd, Prospects House,
Booth Street East, Manchester M13 9EP, UK
t 0161 277 5238 e degreefraud@prospects.ac.uk
www.prospects.ac.uk · www.hedd.ac.uk
www.luminate.prospects.ac.uk
🐦 @HEDD_UK

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