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Pacific solution

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ONE of the many internet-based purveyors of unaccredited degrees has registered itself on Norfolk Island, safe from Australian regulators but able to call itself an Australian company.

Its arrival places it in an exploding virtual marketplace of unaccredited internet "universities" and counterfeit degrees of real universities.

The Norfolk Island territorial Government has confirmed the International University of America Pty Ltd was registered under the Norfolk Island Companies Act on July 31 last year.

The Department of Education, Science and Training has been trying to find out more about the IUA since being alerted to its presence by the *HES*.

DEST is still living down embarrassment after the federal Government inadvertently allowed assent to a 1998 territorial assembly act recognising virtual provider Greenwich University, which moved from Hawaii to escape political pressure over unaccredited providers.

Greenwich became a self-accrediting institution under its own act, like mainland universities, and now uses the universities' "edu" internet domain, although its courses have been denied recognition under the Australian Qualifications Framework.

Now the biter has been bitten. Greenwich is trying to repel claims by the IUA, formerly of California and now using a British internet service, that it is finalising collaboration with Greenwich.

Greenwich president Pauline Butler, partner of chancellor John Walsh of Brannagh, has responded to the unrequited embrace with a statement saying the IUA "has no connection with Greenwich University nor is any connection or affiliation under discussion".

"We are disturbed by this blatantly false description given to this IUA entity and have formally put in an advice to the Norfolk Island Government seeking action at a governmental level," says Butler. "There is only one university on Norfolk Island and that is Greenwich."

A spokeswoman for the Australian Securities and Investments Commission says Norfolk Island companies are beyond its powers unless they have a mainland presence.

So-called qualifications from degree mills have been described as a CV time bomb – and one from IUA has already been detected.

Kate Corfield, an associate of Perth-based international pre-employment screening agency Quest Research, says her investigation into the IUA degree claimed by a candidate revealed that the operation claims to be domiciled on Norfolk Island.

Corfield says she discovered that the IUA is not authorised to grant degrees or recognised at all in the UK, US or Australia. She doesn't know what happened to the job applicant, as the agency only passes on information to the employer.

The *HES* has been unable to contact anyone connected with the IUA.

Authorities on online education providers, such as John Bear of California and George Brown of Adelaide, have speculated that the boom in internet degree mills could become an opportunity for money laundering, although no entity has been accused so far.

The Australian Institute of Criminology agrees it's possible. Some degree sellers have links to organised crime in Russia.

Bear says one former degree mill, Columbia State University, whose owner has been jailed, is

believed to have taken about \$US70 million in four or five years. But there is rarely any way of verifying such figures.

Brown, an Adelaide academic with an international reputation as a degree-mill sleuth, is investigating another operation close to home, www.coastal-retreat.com, a website registered in New Zealand.

This site links to another called Instant Degrees, which tells viewers they can "benefit by getting a bachelor, master or doctorate college degree in a matter of days with no coursework. Legal loopholes exploited."

It continues: "Tired of being passed over for promotions because you don't have a degree? Discover a little-known secret to enhance your employability and prestige. We have thousands of satisfied clients worldwide."

It is thought to be a front for some of the Cheshire cat "universities" on the net, which reinvent themselves after being exposed by the media or closed down by authorities in their home country.

As the *HES* has reported previously (March 13), the most familiar of these is the international operation said to be run by a Los Angeles man known as Henry Heston that spews out spams offering "a prosperous future, money-earning power and the admiration of all".

Identities it has employed include the "universities" of Brentwick, Harrington, Palmers Green and San Moritz. It has used a London mailing address for a building housing a dry-cleaning shop. Telephone vendors of its degrees have worked in various countries.

The *HES* has been contacted by a person claiming to be a vendor in eastern Europe who says: "The name of the university that we are selling today is Parkwood, but in the past the name was Glencullen, Wexford, Shelbourne, Devonshire, Thornewood, Ravenhurst and many others.

"The name changes as soon as a bad review in the press appears. In the US alone more than 70,000 people have degrees from us."

Bear says the operation has mailing-service addresses in England and Ireland, telemarketing in Romania, diploma printing in Israel and banking in Cyprus.

Australia's official agency on foreign educational qualifications, the National Office of Overseas Skills Recognition, estimates it gets about two dozen suspect documents each year from "a variety of countries", but no single agency investigates all suspected education fraud.

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