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Mail-order Bachelors

By Patrick Lawnham
13mar02

WIN the admiration of all", promise the spam emails advertising university degrees: but admiration in higher education can be cheaper than a fake Armani.

Starting at \$300, you can buy a "validated" bachelor degree in the field of your choice by answering a questionnaire on your "life experience". Delivery of the testamur can be within 21 days.

Do people at work who have university degrees ask your advice? If so, you merit a degree yourself.

St Regis University, which has taken a name similar to the venerable Jesuit Regis University in the US, asks prospective "students": "Are not your skills and education as meaningful and valuable as those obtained in a traditional setting?"

"An enormous amount of research and labour is required" to compile each person's course record, St Regis says.

Scores of "universities" are lurking on the internet, heirs of the 1980s mail-order diploma mills. As one is struck down by law changes or enforcement, another starts up. Fake universities, phoney accrediting agencies and offers of counterfeit degrees have grown bolder under the noses of governments and official accrediting bodies around the world.

Some charge more than \$2000 for masters degrees and doctorates. Some are promoted by the familiar spam email offering degrees "from prestigious non-accredited universities based on your present knowledge and life experience". More insidiously, that email has found a cyberspace imitator who has posted internet-site advertisements for "verifiable" degrees in the name of mainstream universities, including several in Australia. The Australian Vice-Chancellors Committee will consider a possible response to the counterfeit threat today. It may include a national degree database. The Department of Education, Science and Training will approach the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission to act on the possible sale of fake Australian degrees.

A DEST spokesman said the department would also soon post a warning to the public on its website about "unscrupulous or bogus operators" in higher education.

Why does higher education attract these growing numbers of fraudsters, and why does it matter? Harold Noah and Max Eckstein, in their book *Fraud and Education: The Worm in the Apple*, say exam results and credentials serve as evidence of competence and a complex modern economy depends on such assurances. "If they are false, all aspects of the functioning of a society suffer," they say. The scope of the scams is worrying in another way: So much economic activity – estimated by some to be in the hundreds of millions of dollars a year globally – is counterproductive.

While the purchase of fake degrees, or the actual degrees of phoney universities, might appear victimless except for gullible or lazy employers, these operators usually imply jobs or promotions will follow. But people using fake qualifications are putting a time bomb in their CVs.

In the scam's most basic form is the "novelty" merchandiser such as the US site [fakedegrees.com](#) which sells a do-it-yourself certificate. Some universities have pressured sites against including their institutions in their list of fake choices.

Then there are the sales of degrees based on life experience "conferred" by the dubious universities. The familiar emails on the internet have advertised degrees from a cluster of unaccredited "universities" since at least 1996, in what is believed to be a franchised operation using different telephone numbers with answering machines.

"Obtain a prosperous future, money-earning power and the admiration of all," it begins. This continuing email and web-based enterprise is known as the "Henry Heston" operation, after a name attributed to a southern Californian thought to be behind the business. These "life experience degrees" were initially offered for as little as \$US125 (\$240) but the asking price is now more than

\$US1000. They are awarded in the name of one of several "universities" with mailing addresses in London or Dublin, including Brentwick, Devonshire, Glencullen, Harrington, Palmers Green, San Moritz and Shelbourne. The London mailing address is an office above a dry cleaner at 196 High Road in suburban Wood Green.

US distance education expert John Bear says government investigators and journalists have told him more than a million of the spam emails are sent out every week, mainly from Romania.

"Many telephone numbers are given, they are all answering services. The follow-up phone calls are made [primarily by South Africans] from Romania. When orders are placed [200 to 500 customers a week], they are sent to one of two printing plants in Jerusalem. Diplomas are printed, and shipped by Federal Express to Los Angeles. All banking is done in Cyprus" he said in an email. Orders potentially could represent more than \$US1 million a week. There are many other "universities" on the internet that don't necessarily use email for advertising. They include Earlscroft, which offers a bachelor degree for \$US150 but also says it offers distance education. Two others, St Regis University and Concordia College, are both based in Dominica.

St Regis is recommended by Richard Hoyer, in his book *A College Degree in Your Spare Time*. "Dr" Hoyer happens to run St Regis.

The US state of Maine is host to the Universal Life University and Northern New England University, founded by angry single mother Camille Weston, who doesn't want to see other people struggle as she claims she did with an expensive education. Why pay \$US20,000 for a degree we'll give you for \$US100, she asks.

Bear says any degree should be evaluated on the quality of the work done to earn it, the credentials of the people who make that determination, and the legal authority of the school to award the degrees. He says the FBI used to get indictments easily from federal grand juries for diploma mills, with more than 50 during the 1980s for mail and wire fraud, tax fraud and conspiracy.

"Presumably they still could but they are doing almost nothing," he told the *HES*.

"Each country says in effect, 'the main stuff is done elsewhere, let the other guys do it', Bear says. "I can understand why some consumers are misled, although it is still my belief that most of the people who buy these degrees know just what they're doing, and hope to get away with it," he says.

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