

PROSPECTS

hedd

VERIFICATION + AUTHENTICATION

Office for
Students 

Advice and
guidance on
degree fraud
for students

Degree fraud affects everyone within higher education, yet this growing problem is little understood and rarely talked about. How did the issue get so big while also slipping under the radar – and where do you come into it?

What is degree fraud?

Simply put, degree fraud is the method by which 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.

How seriously should this be taken? One or two people telling fibs won't hurt anyone, surely?

The truth is that degree fraud is a crime with grave consequences for victims and perpetrators.

We trust professionals to do their job. Whether it's a doctor or mechanic, we assume that people responsible for important services have completed the necessary training.

It's what you are training toward – to have a certificate that validates the effort that went into getting your degree.

Fake degrees undermine that trust entirely. There should be no shortcuts to professional work. Candidates who use fake degrees to get jobs are not only trading on false credentials as far as their employer is concerned; they make a mockery of the idea of a fair and meritocratic job market.

In a survey of 1,000 students and graduates, 33% admitted to lying about important information in order to get a job.

Of those, 40% said they had exaggerated their education and 11% admitted to outright making a degree up for themselves.

That's 36 students and graduates out of 1,000 who made up a degree for themselves. We don't yet know the full scale of degree fraud, but if these figures are anything to go by, then it's possible that the person being interviewed alongside you has lied about their degree.

CASE STUDY

An NHS psychiatrist was jailed for five months after she spent 22 years working without qualifications. Her qualifications were discovered to be false after it emerged she had rewritten the will of a widowed patient to make herself the beneficiary. The records of over 3,000 medics will now be re-assessed as a result of this crime.



How does degree fraud affect me?

You won't be a stranger to the hard work that goes into getting a degree. This is why we have to collectively make sure that the time and money spent is respected. There are a surprising number of ways in which your degree can be devalued by the actions of others

CASE STUDY

700 criminal cases had to be re-examined after it was discovered that the forensic psychologist in charge of them had lied about his degree. It was later found that many of his court-submitted reports had been copy and pasted from Google.

- **Opportunity theft** – This involves the deprivation of an opportunity to someone else as a result of fraud. If someone is lying about their degree, then they will manipulate the situation to appear better than all other candidates.
- **Inadequate education** – Teachers are sometimes found to have committed degree fraud. If your teacher is lying about their degree, the quality of your education is compromised.
- **Template theft** – Involves the intentional or unintentional transfer of a degree to scammers to be used as a counterfeiting template.
- **IP plagiarism** – You might have allowed your university to use pictures of you in promotional materials. If a bogus university uses these, then your face is representing their criminal operation.
- **Compromised fairness** – Those who pay to pass their essays at university will consistently receive better grades and opportunities than those who work for it.
- **Domino effect** – Once one person lies at the interview stage, incentive for honesty collapses. Now everyone deems it okay to lie rather than stand on their own merit.
- **Increased demand** – When a need is established to provide fake degrees, suppliers will match the demand. This drives down costs and raises availability, so fakes become a cheaper and more viable option than studying.
- **Degree parity** – If an employer accepts a so-called 'life degree' from a bogus institution, then no difference is established between genuine and fake education.



How does degree fraud happen?

Fake universities

These are usually just online entities set up to extract money in exchange for fake documentation, although they may sometimes enable the 'student' to undertake pseudo-coursework or exams.

Fake universities can either admit that their degrees are worthless or pretend that their degrees are recognised. Either way, customers will come. There's a healthy industry in selling education at a fraction of the real cost, especially if people don't care that it isn't a genuine degree.

Fake certificates

You've most likely seen a degree certificate before. There's typically a watermark or a holographic foil to indicate it's a genuine document. We rely on these components to assure that what we have in front of us is an authentic degree. Unfortunately, for every sophisticated technology there is a criminal with access to the same machine.

With advancements in counterfeiting techniques, it can be difficult to tell a genuine degree from a fake one. The only successful method is to check against student records, which is why you should always insist that your employer verifies your degree when you start a job. At the moment, most employers don't perform this vital task. This is one reason why degree fraud is able to flourish.

CASE STUDY

A chairman of two NHS trusts was imprisoned after falsely claiming to have a BA, MBA and a PhD. Barristers assessed his fraudulently gained earnings to be over £640,000.

'I bear in mind the defendant was narrowly preferred to another candidate when he was appointed to the hospice,' the judge said. 'Those who appointed him considered honesty and integrity to be central to the result.' The former chairman was ordered to sell his boat to recover the money.



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

Confidence tricks

As part of a confidence trick, a scammer will walk into an interview and get the job based on how much they can brag. This relies on employers not making any checks. Grade inflation is a common weapon in the confidence trickster's armoury.

Giving yourself the 2:1 you feel you deserved instead of the 2:2 you achieved may seem innocent, but it can have serious consequences. If you exaggerate your grade on your CV, you can be found criminally responsible under the Fraud Act 2006.

Confidence tricks are unique, as they rely entirely on opportunity and lying rather than instruments of crime (i.e. fake websites or fake certificates). This type of degree fraud represents a significant amount of the reports we receive.

Essay mills

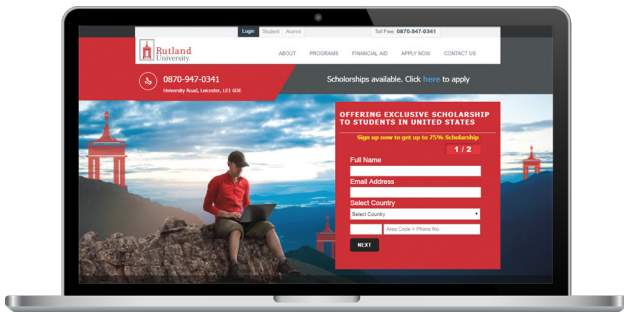
This involves the paid commissioning of essay material. Most universities have plagiarism safeguards like Turnitin, but this method of degree fraud is discreet, as it involves original material.

While essay mills are not illegal, using their material is. They are also morally wrong. The grade on your certificate should reflect the knowledge gained on the course. If you've paid to pass your essays, it's no different than buying a degree.

CASE STUDY

A bogus university in Ireland faced scandal in the 1990s after it emerged that they weren't linked to Oxford University as they claimed. American students paid a non-refundable \$21,000 for one year's tuition before realising their mistake.

'I was humiliated and very angry that they had done this to me. When I asked them, "Is this Oxford University" they confirmed that it was. I thought it was just one of the colleges, like Queen's College or Christ Church, although I'd never heard of it.'



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 at the beginning of raising awareness about it. To eradicate degree fraud completely, recruiters would need to verify the credentials of every single candidate. In the meantime, you can take these simple steps to mitigate the effects of degree fraud

Contacting Hedd

At Hedd, we follow up reports and investigate degree fraud. It wouldn't be possible, however, without tips from concerned people who have seen something suspicious.

We have a form for reporting any incidents of degree fraud at www.hedd.ac.uk/contact. If you don't feel comfortable giving your contact details, you can do so anonymously.

We log and investigate any and all suspected incidents of bogus institutions, degree vendors and essay mills.

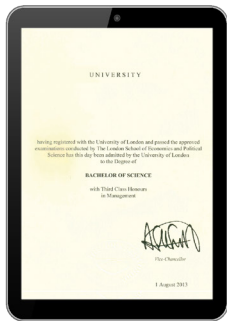
Although we don't have the capacity to investigate individuals suspected of committing degree fraud, we will provide advice and guidance on who best to report it to.

Consulting registers

The government provides an up-to-date register of which bodies are recognised and which are listed. The recognised bodies list can be found at www.gov.uk/check-a-university-is-officially-recognised/recognised-bodies and the listed bodies at www.gov.uk/check-a-university-is-officially-recognised/listed-bodies.

A recognised body is any institution that can award its own degrees (your average university). A listed body awards their degrees in association with another institution (like schools or colleges offering foundation or top-up courses on behalf of a university).

Taking a quick look at this register means that if you encounter a suspect institution in future, you'll be able to quickly reference it.



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

Don't post pictures online

Graduation is one of the most important and proudest events in any student's life. Naturally, you'll want to document it and show your degree off on social media.

Unfortunately, this is a counterfeiter's paradise. The quality of modern cameras means that every detail of your degree will be visible when you take a photo of it, ready to be transferred to a template.

A counterfeiter needs only to look through your graduation hashtag to find hundreds of reference points for their fake. At this point, they know what a real degree from your university looks like.

The only way to protect yourself against this sort of fraud is not to take and post a picture of your degree certificate in the first place. A certificate is a personal document. You wouldn't post a picture of your passport or driver's licence – your degree is no different.

Insist upon verification

You should expect to have your degree credentials checked. It's the only way to ensure that candidates with fake certificates and inflated grades don't get jobs at the expense of genuine candidates. A minority of employers currently make consistent checks, and with your help we can ensure it becomes standard practice sooner rather than later.

Hedd degree fraud checklist

- ✓ Report any incidents to Hedd as and when you see them.
- ✓ Check suspected schools against official government registers.
- ✓ Don't publicise photos of your degree and let others know about the risks.
- ✓ Put pressure on employers and screening agencies to verify – it costs nothing and could just stop opportunity theft.

Cifas is the UK's largest cross-sector fraud organisation. As experts in all kinds of fraud, they know first-hand how damaging CV lies can be for a graduate. Their 'Don't end your career before it's started' campaign highlights the potential conviction that awaits anyone who lies about their qualifications. Find out more at www.cifas.org.uk/

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About Hedd

Prospects Hedd is the UK higher education system's official degree verification service. Managed by Jisc, Prospects Hedd was launched in 2011 to help 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.

Prospects Hedd is part of Jisc

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