

## CHAPTER 5

### COUNTERFEIT QUALIFICATIONS

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The present paragraph will be devoted to the three main aspects of counterfeit qualifications:

- a. The case of institutions, agencies and other types of entities, which openly declare to grant forged qualifications;
- b. The case of corruption in the award of PhD degrees, as a practice fostering the circulation of qualifications with no market value;
- c. The case of the so-called 'loophole institutions'.

New, easily-available IT technologies and the latest print devices allow institutions/agencies to forge, completely or partially, qualifications with a very high degree of resemblance to the original ones. The qualifications are indeed advertised as "identical" to them.

Since the phenomenon is particularly common in those countries where, in the past, a considerable number of recognised institutions ceased to operate, changed their name or discarded their archives, because they were lost, modified or even destroyed; in order to give the most comprehensive possible picture we have identified two parallel case studies: the ex Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China, which show some striking similarities.

Altered or modified qualifications are different from the ones that have been discussed in the previous chapter. In this case, the information contained in the credentials issued by official institutions is altered; for instance, the name of the student is changed or the issue date or the final mark obtained. Also, the transcript of exam results can be modified, the marks corresponding to each exam or the collected credits, as well as official covering letters issued by the awarding institutions, where it is usually declared that they are responsible for the award of the qualification in question can be altered.

In order to reduce risks to a minimum, it is possible to identify a few points, which could help to spot forged qualifications<sup>90</sup>:

- always request qualifications in their original language with the corresponding translation, if necessary<sup>91</sup>: translated documents alone are not enough, even if they have been drafted by an official institution;
- it is advisable not to accept copies of the qualifications only, which are more likely to be altered, but to always request the originals;
- always check carefully that the credentials do not contain typographical errors, grammar mistakes or rather “unnatural expressions”;
- always check the letter headed paper of the institution and the name of the people who signed the credential;
- if possible, compare the credentials to be examined to other ones issued by the same institution or in the same country;
- get in touch with the awarding institution, in order to double-check the name of the qualification holder.

### 5.1 THE FORMER USSR

As was mentioned earlier, credential evaluation can become particularly difficult when the usual sources of information become unavailable, due to heavy social changes or hefty political upheavals. The best example of this phenomenon, are the institutions which operated in the former USSR<sup>92</sup> and that, for different reasons, were shut down, changed their name or their status and destroyed their archives. On the ashes of the previously official institutions, agencies were founded with the purpose of selling forged qualifications, which cannot be double-checked with the issuing institutions. They offer dissertations; counterfeit certificates, *Kandidat*<sup>93</sup> and *Doktor Nauk*<sup>94</sup> qualifications upon request of the clients. For those who have already achieved an academic qualification, they offer to alter their transcript with higher marks than the original ones. In some cases, the websites of these agencies advertise qualifications directly printed on *Goznak*<sup>95</sup> templates, including all elements of genuine qualifications. At the time of writing, some of the websites listed below have been shut down. Nonetheless, it is always necessary to bear in mind that these forged qualification will continue to circulate in the market for years to come.

<sup>90</sup> On this topic, it might also be useful to browse the instructions on how to obtain academic credential for evaluation purposes on the World Education Services website: <http://www.wes.org/ewenr/documentation.htm>

<sup>91</sup> In the following countries qualifications are usually issued in English: in Asia Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan and Thailand. In the Middle East: Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, Palestinian National Authority, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Arab Emirates, Yemen. In Africa: Eritrea, Ethiopia and Sudan. In Europe, the Diploma Supplement is becoming common in a good number of countries, it is issued in English but it always comes with the qualification in original language.

<sup>92</sup> K. Warren, Russian Diplomas for Sale, in «NAFSA newsletter - Admission wrap up», Special issue 1, June 2005

<sup>93</sup> The qualification *Kandidat Nauk* (кандидат наук) had been granted – in some cases it still is – in ex Soviet states, since 1934. In the US and UK Higher Education systems, it corresponds to a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) qualification. Nonetheless, its evaluation varies from country to country, mainly due to the fact that the USSR high school leaving qualifications were achieved after 10 years of school. In some other ex USSR countries, this name was attributed to lower level qualifications.

<sup>94</sup> The qualification *Doktor Nauk* (доктор наук) is an academic credential, achieved by prospective university professors or by students who would like to pursue a career in the field of academic research. It is achieved after the qualification of *Kandidat Nauk*, but abroad it is not always recognised at this level.

<sup>95</sup> *Goznak* (Государственный знак) is the Unitary Enterprise that is responsible for the production of coins and banknotes.

The ENIC-NARIC network identified 29 agencies that sell Russian forged qualifications on-line; the majority of their website is in Russian language only, therefore they are targeted exclusively at Russian speaking users.

**Table 2:** Website of agencies selling forged academic qualifications in Russia

<a href="http://www.diploms-maker.ru">http://www.diploms-maker.ru</a> *	<a href="http://www.prodiam-diplom.ru">http://www.prodiam-diplom.ru</a>
<a href="http://www.vuzdiplom.ru">http://www.vuzdiplom.ru</a>	<a href="http://www.diplomshop.ru">http://www.diplomshop.ru</a>
<a href="http://www.a-diplom.ru">http://www.a-diplom.ru</a> *	<a href="http://www.needdiplom.ru">http://www.needdiplom.ru</a>
<a href="http://www.diplomov.net">http://www.diplomov.net</a> *	<a href="http://www.mosdiplom.ru">http://www.mosdiplom.ru</a>
<a href="http://www.docka.ru">http://www.docka.ru</a> *	<a href="http://yandiplom.ru">http://yandiplom.ru</a> *
<a href="http://www.vip-diplom.ru">http://www.vip-diplom.ru</a> *	<a href="http://www.vipdisser.ru">http://www.vipdisser.ru</a>
<a href="http://www.dissertation.ru">http://www.dissertation.ru</a>	<a href="http://pero.pp.ru">http://pero.pp.ru</a>
<a href="http://www.kupit-diplom.ru">http://www.kupit-diplom.ru</a>	

\* = Not available anymore.

(Source: NAFSA)

Doctoral qualifications are not only forged in Russia, but they are also sold. Despite not being directly related with the topic of 'diploma mills', this is a phenomenon of great interest: first of all because it derives from the considerable difficulties that the Russian Higher Education Systems has been facing in the last few years; secondly, because its final outcome is still the circulation of worthless high-level academic degrees. Given the increased competition in the market, a number of companies offer to sell doctoral dissertation at competitive prices<sup>96</sup>. The falsification of doctoral qualifications concerns three different aspects of their achievement:

- a. The dissertation: a *Candidate Nauk* or *Doktor Nauk* dissertation is supposed to be an original and substantial contribution to the existing body of knowledge in a specific subject field. Usually the "dissertations for sale" do not fulfil this feature, since they are blatantly copied from previous academic works, therefore cannot be defined original in any way.

<sup>96</sup> Osipian, Ararat L.: *Dissertations for sale: Corruption in Russia's Doctoral Education*, Vanderbilt University, Department of Leadership, Policy and Organizations, Nashville, 2009 at: [www.aeaweb.org/aea/conference/program/retrieve.php?pdfid=88](http://www.aeaweb.org/aea/conference/program/retrieve.php?pdfid=88)

- b. The holder of the doctorate: not all dissertations circulating on the market have been written by the actual holders of the credential. Usually professional ghost writers, who are paid to do the job, draft the dissertations sold on the market.
- c. The diploma: diplomas and doctorates may be forged.

In recent times, Russian and international media have often brought the issue to public attention and, according to some estimates, about 23% of all defended doctoral dissertations are written for money by professionals operating illegally on the market.

It seems that the fashion of holding doctoral degrees is particularly widespread among politicians and bureaucrats, who want to distinguish themselves from the masses. As a matter of fact, in 2006, *the Times* and the *Sunday Times* accused the dissertation of the Russian President, Vladimir Putin, of plagiarism<sup>97</sup>. Allegedly, Putin obtained a *Kandidat Nauk* at the St. Petersburg Mining Institute, but US researchers at the Brookings Institution, based in Washington D.C., discovered that the President's piece of research was based on another work published in 1978 by two professors of the University of Pittsburgh, which was translated almost literally by KGB officials. Furthermore, the two US researchers established that the discussion of that doctoral thesis would not have entitled the Russian President to achieve a full doctorate.

Ospian (p.12) states in his article: "The culture of plagiarism, cheating and forgeries is widespread in Russia. Master theses and term papers can be bought on-line or custom-prepared for the clients and so can doctoral dissertations. Academic corruption is not an exception". Nonetheless, plagiarism and forgery also have their roots in the cultural habits of the Russian people: "One has to know about the importance of kitsch and showing off in the society: "It is like the French term *faire montrer*. It is better to look like than to be. It is very oriental".

In Russia about 169 firms working in this sector have been identified: the majority of them offers dissertations for sale drafted by ghost-writers in Russian. Some of them also offer the choice to have them in English.

The professional writers are usually recruited among researchers already employed in universities department or faculties. Sometimes, the package also includes accompanying documents for VAK. Most of the agencies are legally registered companies and pay taxes. The starting prices for a *Kandidat Nauk* range from \$900 to \$16,000; while those to obtain a *Doktor Nauk* qualification vary from \$4,000 to \$25,000.

The Russian academic world is calling for urgent action to be taken in order to

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<sup>97</sup> The Sunday Times: "Putin accused of plagiarising his PhD Thesis", 26<sup>th</sup> March, 2006: <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/article695235.ece>

<sup>98</sup> In Russian: *Высшая аттестационная комиссия*, the VAK is the national government agency in Russia, Ukraine and some other States of the Russian Federation. Its duty is to monitor the award of advanced academic degrees and applications for the ranks of Associate Professor and of Professor. During the Soviet Regime, the VAK was a very efficient institution and was very accurate in controlling the quality of the dissertations and of doctoral documents. After the fall of the Regime, the saw its staff strongly reduced and it struggles to manage the applications coming only from the Russia.

safeguard the quality of doctoral degrees and to tackle the problem of forged qualifications. In this respect, the VAK, the Higher Attestation Commission<sup>98</sup>, recently launched an on-line system called "Antiplagiat-VAK", with the purpose of uncovering plagiarism in doctoral dissertations. The system has the capacity to use more than eight million on-line sources to track possible cases of plagiarism.

## 5.2 THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

After Russia, China is another country where the falsification of academic documents flourishes at different levels.

Quite surprisingly, students themselves are the first ones to 'alter' their academic qualifications, when they have to translate them to apply for admission at foreign universities worldwide. Nowadays, only a few higher education institutions offer an internal translation service of transcripts and diplomas or issue official English translation of credentials. As a consequence, in the great majority of cases, students translate their qualifications themselves and the documents they produce are not checked by any official institutions. Therefore translations often contain mistakes or their content doesn't actually match the original documents.

Some minor translation errors are not difficult to spot: 计算机基础 (computer basics) often becomes "computer base", when translated into English. Sometimes, the English document may be the result of an "interpretive translation" or even be custom-made for the benefit of the student.

For instance, those courses considered to be irrelevant for further study at a Western institution are omitted, such as Marxist Theory (马克思主义理论) and History of the Communist Party of China (中共党史). In a certificate of graduation, the mention to the adult higher education sector (成人高等教育) might disappear in favour of the regular higher education sector (普通高等院校).

In some other cases, the English qualification may contain extra information that may not be true. For example, a certified English copy of a bachelor's degree in engineering may indicate the holder is also awarded the professional title of engineer. In fact, higher education institutions in China are not allowed to award professional titles. After graduation with a bachelor's degree in engineering (for which a more accurate translation is bachelor's degree in technology), a student usually has to gain a minimum of five year work experience, as an "assistant engineer" (助理工程师) before achieving the professional title "engineer" (工程师).

By their very nature, translations are approximations rather than equivalents of the original text. Furthermore, the use of the "related" terminology may be quite different in China and in the rest of the world. Translations, therefore, should not be taken at face value<sup>99</sup>.

As it has been observed earlier in the case of Russia, also the Chinese Higher Education System in the last few years has known the widespread phenomenon of corruption in the award of PhD qualifications<sup>100</sup>. In the People's Republic of China, this occurrence was fostered by the rapid expansion of the PhD programme offered

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<sup>99</sup> International Qualifications Assessment Service (IQAS), International Education Guide for the assessment of education from China, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Alberta, 2009 at: <http://employment.alberta.ca/immigration/6432.html>

<sup>100</sup> Asian Times: "In China, an easy route to academic glory", by Stephen Wong, 25<sup>th</sup> November 2009: <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China/KK25Ad01.html>

over the last ten years, as a result of the government's attempt to adapt the offer of academic courses to the need of the expanding Chinese industry. Experts fear that such an increase in the doctoral programmes is not going to be matched with the necessary quality enhancement. In particular, there has been a considerable increase in the number of doctoral qualifications awarded to businessmen and government officials, which are sometimes obtained through a non-traditional route.

While for most ordinary Chinese citizens the path towards the award of a doctoral degree remains demanding, allegedly, powerful Chinese officials are now offered a "green route" from entrance examination to graduation. Universities usually organise admission exams and in order to attract students with some political influence, they even offer exam-free admission.

Once enrolled, these students "with benefits" are exempt from attending courses; in many cases, they even send their PAs to take the classes and to write examinations.

One of the most prominent examples, is the former chairman of China's Securities Regulatory Commission, whose name will be kept confidential, who was arrested in February 2009 on charges of corruption.

According to his CV, he was a doctor of economics, but his master degree was in history; nonetheless the most surprising thing was that it took him only two years to obtain his PhD. This case attracted public attention, since the above-mentioned official must have been "not only a quick learner, but also a capable multi-tasker to complete [a PhD] course, pass exams, finish a dissertation and pass his oral defence within only two years, [...] while at the same time being also engaged in his no doubt hectic official business". A professor of the Fudan University in Shanghai called for an investigation into the acquisition of the above-mentioned doctoral degree, but his demand was not met.

In the Chinese Higher Education system, the majority of universities are public; this means that the Government assigns both the head of the governing body, as the funds allocated to the institution. To some extent, university officials themselves are government officials - they are often transferred from or to a government department, and so are linked with government officials from other branches. In Chinese universities, the status of an employee is not decided by the academic title they hold but solely by their administrative ranking: the higher the ranking, the more power the person has. So university employees often target higher administrative rankings than decent academic titles.

Ironically, this has led to a situation where government officials are queuing up for higher academic degrees while university officials and professors are competing for higher administrative rankings.

### **5.3 HOW TO GET A "GENUINE" DEGREE IN 5 DAYS: INSTANTDEGREES.COM**

Instantdegrees.com is surely a website that must be considered when dealing with counterfeit qualifications: exploiting the "legal loopholes" of the system, here it is possible to obtain a fully "genuine" academic qualification.

Clients are not allowed to choose the awarding institution nor the country of origin, but they can specify the type of qualification, the subject area and the academic

year of issue.

In order to strengthen the value of the credential, it is stressed that the qualification will not be a distance learning one, but it will look like as if it was issued after attending a regular course in the country of origin. The relationship between the agency and the clients is regulated by a contract which is available on-line for consultation (<http://www.instantdegrees.com/tos.html>). Also the transcript of the whole programme can be purchased on-line.

Clients, who are interested in buying a qualification, must enter on-line the corresponding professional profile: on the website it is made clear that neither a "CV nor documentary evidence is required to back up [their] declaration".

This website was signalled by G. Evans in his book "How to get a genuine College Degree in 5 days".

#### 5.4 ON-LINE SALE OF COUNTERFEIT QUALIFICATIONS

In their book, "Degree Mills: The billion dollar Industry that has sold over a million fake diplomas"<sup>101</sup>, Allen Enzell and John Bear published a list of websites managed by organisations operating mainly in the US, which sell fake or forged academic qualifications on-line.

##### *List of websites selling counterfeit qualifications*

<http://www.bogusphd.com>  
<http://www.diplomareplacementservice.com>  
<http://www.boxfreeconcepts.com/aaardvark.html>  
<http://www.diplomamakers.com>  
<http://www.backalleypress.com>  
<http://www.diplomasandmore.com>  
<http://www.blackmarket-press.net> \*  
<http://www.closeduniversity.com/ecommerce> \*  
<http://www.boxfreeconcepts.com/fake/diplomas.html>  
<http://www.documentsandsuch.com> \*  
<http://www.closedcollege.com>  
<http://www.espionage-store.com/cert.html>  
<http://www.cooldegree.com> \*  
<http://www.fake-diplomas.com> \*  
<http://www.counterfeitlibrary.com> \*  
<http://fakedegrees.com> \*  
<http://www.degree-now.com>  
<http://www.fakediplomas.com> \*  
<http://www.fantasydiplomas.com> \*  
<http://www.graduatennow.com>  
<http://www.diplomacollection.com> \*  
<http://www.peterleonquinn.com> \*  
<http://www.diplomamasters.com> \*  
<http://www.premier-degrees.com> \*

\* = Not available anymore.

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<sup>101</sup> Prometheus Books, New York, 2004