



# Hundreds with fake degrees nabbed

Both Singaporeans and foreigners found out while applying for government passes

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OVER 400 foreigners were caught last year for lying to the Manpower Ministry in their work pass applications, a fourfold increase from the 97 cases in 2005.

MOM did not give a breakdown but the majority are believed to have used fake or forged qualifications in applying for employment passes which are for highly qualified people, or S-Passes for semi-skilled workers.

Immigration and Checkpoints Authority figures also point to a rising trend of workers using qualifications from degree mills, which are bogus universities that sell degrees for little or no study.

In the last two years, ICA caught 660 people, both foreigners and locals, lying in applications for immigration passes.

It could not give a breakdown but said many lied about their qualifications while trying to secure a dependent's pass, student visa or permanent resident pass.

Some of the locals caught had lied in the applications to be sponsors for foreigners seeking various immigration passes.

Both MOM and ICA said making false statements in the applications for work or immigration passes is a serious offence which carries heavy penalties, including fines and jail. Foreigners caught are also likely to be repatriated.

The ICA and MOM figures are just the tip of the iceberg, say job recruiters like People Worldwide Consulting and resume-screening companies such as IntegraScreen and First Advantage.

While most of those found out so far are foreigners, experts warn that more Singaporeans are also beefing up their resumes with fake or forged degrees.

One indication: The names of 36 people from Singapore showed up on a list of 9,612 people exposed in the United States recently for having bought fake diplomas and degrees.

First Advantage, a US-based company which checks claims made by job applicants, estimates that 12 per cent to 16 per cent of job seekers here are not entirely truthful in their CVs. Often, they inflate their academic achievements, current pay or responsibilities.

IntegraScreen, which does screening work for the immigration authorities in several countries in Asia and the Middle East, said about 5 per cent of the resumes they screen are found to be fake.

Its managing director, Mr John Baxter, said: "The use of diploma mills is exploding as the Internet makes buying bogus degrees easier than ever before. More workers are buying

these degrees because they're looking for an edge in the competitive job market in Singapore."

Almost any degree, from aviation to zoology, can be purchased. All it takes is a credit card number and computer access.

Most degree mills charge between US\$50 and US\$5,000 (S\$69 to S\$6,900) for degrees at all levels. Often, buyers only have to fill up a form stating their work and life experiences and pay up.

Within a week, they are sent a professional-looking degree scroll and transcripts of optional grades to show potential employers.

For an additional US\$60, some degree mills offer laminated student identity cards, even though they have no physical campus.

Some even provide an after-sales service, with phone operators who will verify graduations and send transcripts to prospective employers who check.

Some go to the extent of offering fake degrees that look similar to those from such established universities as Harvard, Arizona State University or the University of Minnesota. Using high-tech equipment, the diplomas include watermarks and holographs.

The number of degree mills is not known, but Integra has compiled a list of over 500, with 90 per cent based in the US.

Mr John Bear, co-author of a book on degree mills, estimates that annual sales in fake degrees exceed US\$500 million.

In Singapore, job recruiters say there are three groups of people who resort to using bogus degrees.

The first includes those who pay up to US\$500 for undergraduate degrees and transcripts. These are non-graduates who use the fake qualifications to score a job, promotion or pay rise.

The second are consultants, trainers and private school lecturers who may have a first degree and some expertise in a particular area, but feel having a master's or PhD bolsters their credentials.

They are willing to pay between US\$1,599 and US\$10,000 for their bogus degrees.

The third group is made up of successful businessmen who fork out up to S\$20,000 for honorary PhDs. They take care to indicate that these are honorary degrees, but like to be called "Doctor".

Mr David Leong, who heads PeopleWorldwide Consulting, said most people who buy their degrees are not victims, but intend to hoodwink employers or business clients.

"People who go online and order themselves a master's degree or PhD within a week know full well what they are doing," he said.

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