

# Detecting Forged Credentials in a High-Tech World

BY RICHARD KEARNEY

**F**raudulent academic documents--whether forged, fabricated, or altered--interfere with the ordinary admission and credit transfer decisions academic officials must make on a daily basis.

Recent advances in information technology have given would-be forgers new tools for plying their trade. Laser printers and easy-to-program type fonts, color photocopy machines, scanning devices and other means for the electronic transmission of information, all in wider use and increasingly accessible, offer credential counterfeiters a sophisticated range of options for fraud. In the United States, academic institutions have responded in kind with new technologies for authenticating U.S. documents: new types of codes, watermarks, raised seals, "copyproof" paper, etc.

Perhaps more important than high-tech prevention measures, however, is the confidence administrators bring to dealing with U.S. documents: knowing what to expect and what to look for is easier when dealing with a single system where documents present a relative uniformity of format, coding, and terminology.

When dealing with credentials from other countries, that confidence must be built again on the basis of different patterns and conventions. The reason is simple: document fraud succeeds most often either when you don't know what to expect or when you expect the wrong thing.

How serious is the problem of fraudulent credentials in international admissions? Judging from the experience of World Education Services (WES), the answer is: not very serious. From January 1990 through March 1993, WES received over 40,000 applications from foreign-educated individuals; over the same period, WES staff confirmed 186 cases of altered documents, representing 0.43% of total cases. These figures suggest that prudence rather than paranoia should govern document review policies.

## I. What Is A Fraudulent Document?

It is useful to define a fraudulent document in relation to an official, authentic document. For international documents, a slight modification of Michigan AACRAO's 1987 definition of an official transcript yields the following:

"An official document is one that has been received directly from the issuing bona fide authority (usually, but not necessarily, the teaching institution). The document must bear the appropriate seal or stamp, date, and official signature(s). Documents received that do not meet these requirements should not be considered official and should be routinely rejected for any permanent use."

Using this definition, we can define five basic types of non-official and illegitimate documents:

1. **Altered Documents** - Official, legitimate documents that have been altered in some way (usually by omissions, additions, or changes).
2. **Fabricated Documents (counterfeits)** - Documents fabricated to represent official documents from real or non-existent institutions (including use of letterheads).
3. **Inside Jobs** - These are special cases because the documents are actually produced by institutional employees, usually for a fee; needless to say, inside jobs are extremely difficult to detect upon initial review.
4. **Special "Translations"** - "Translations" of foreign-language documents that are not just inaccurate but systematically misleading, tantamount to fabrication.
5. **Degree or Diploma Mill Products** - Strictly speaking, the products of degree/diploma mills are not in themselves fabrications, but the academic study they purport to represent certainly is.

## II. Detecting Fraudulent Documents

Document fraud detection proceeds from your accumulated knowledge about an educational system and its documents as measured against the evidence of the documents themselves. Fraud can range from the simplistically obvious to the subtly sophisticated. In most cases, especially at the latter end of the scale, you'll want to obtain confirmation by means of a formal verification.

Note: The abstract categories discussed below have been grouped together for convenience, but not all of them can be applied for all cases. Country- or institution-specific methods of evaluating documents for authenticity can be developed on the basis of experience.

### Physical Evidence

Whenever possible, work with *original documents* rather than photocopies; many types of alteration are difficult to detect on photocopies but easy to spot on originals. Difficulties in altering original documents tend to make fabrication of official letterheads a common type of "original document" fraud. If you must work with photocopies, be alert for unusual shadings, differences in typefaces, and information "cut off" from the edge of the paper (8 1/2" x 11" is not a standard paper size in many countries, and photocopies that have not been sufficiently reduced may leave you without critical details).

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## Two Types of Fraudulent Documents: Altered and Fabricated

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### An Altered Document



Perhaps the most common type of altered document contains a combination of pre-printed information about the credential itself and printed or written information pertaining to the individual. An alteration usually requires changing one or more items of information regarding the individual (name, date, school, grades, etc.). If a specific typeface is used on a machine-printed document, that typeface must be replicated to avoid easy detection. In the case at right, the typeface used in the altered part was not even close to the original, and it is clear that the date, name, and school have been changed.

### The National University of Ireland

Belfield Campus, Belfield Road, Dublin, County Dublin.

#### OFFICIAL TRANSCRIPT OF RECORD

Name of student: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: December 15, 1992

Address: "Inisfree", Carrick Road,  
Dundalk, County Louth, Ireland.

Dates of attendance: From September 1, 1980 To May 30, 1984

Degree Awarded: Bachelor of Liberal Arts.

#### SUMMARY OF RESULTS

TERM	SUBJECT	GRADE
Year 1 1980-1981	Modern English Literature I	B
	Economics	A
	Philosophy I	B
	Irish Heritage	A
Year 2 1981-1982	Modern English Literature II	B
	Social & Political Studies I	A
	Philosophy II	A
Year 3 1982-1983	Psychology I	B
	Social & Political Studies II	A
	Legal Science	B
Year 4 1983-1984	Psychology II	B
	Political Science	A
	Current Affairs	A



*Thomas Murphy*  
Thomas Murphy, Vice Principal.

West African Examinations Council

### School Certificate

JUNE, 1979

This is to Certify that:

having been in attendance at the following recognised school

GIRLS' HIGH SCHOOL, NIMMSI

at the Joint Examination for the School Certificate and General Certificate of Education and qualified for the award of a School Certificate.

The Candidate obtained the following results

SUBJECT	GRADE	WEST AFRICAN CERTIFICATE RESULT	WEST AFRICAN GENERAL CERTIFICATE RESULT
ENGLISH LANGUAGE	B	PASS	
RELIGIOUS KNOWLEDGE	B	CREDIT	PASS
MATHEMATICS	B	PASS	
CHEMISTRY	B	CREDIT	PASS
BIOLOGY	C	CREDIT	PASS
IGBO	7	PASS	
SUBJECTS RECORDED		SIX	THREE

THIRD-DIVISION

CD 17

CANDIDATE No. 05495040

CERTIFICATE No. 30053654

*M. J. K.*  
Registrar in the Council

Any alteration or erasure renders this certificate void.

### A Fabricated Document



Fabricated documents can be made from blank sheets of official school stationery or just created whole without the use of any "original" documents (as in the example at left). Fabricators sensitive to the appearance of authentic documents will usually seek to replicate them as accurately as possible, including all of the important contextual details. Less fastidious fabricators rely upon the ignorance of the receiving party, assuming the latter is not familiar with the appearance of an authentic document from a given institution. In the example at left, there are at least eight glaring contextual errors (plus a few more minor ones) that immediately identify the document as a fabrication, including: 1) transcripts from the constituent institutions of the National University of Ireland are issued under the name of the college (e.g., University College, Cork); 2) there is no "Belfield campus" of the University—the college at Belfield is University College, Dublin; 3) the University does not offer a "Bachelor of Liberal Arts" degree; 4) four-year degrees in the liberal arts are all identified as "Honours" degrees by the University; 5) the month-day-year-date order is almost never used in Europe, most dates being represented as day-month-year; 6) transcripts are signed by the Registrar or a Registry subordinate (e.g., Administrative Officer or Examinations Officer), not by the Vice-Chancellor of the University (there is no "Vice Principal"); 7) transcripts are not called "transcripts," 8) student home addresses do not appear on transcripts (although dates of birth usually do).

*Paper quality* for original documents can vary from country to country, and you should acquaint yourself with the typical paper type, including texture, color, and size. Old documents should show their age. An increasing number of foreign institutions are producing transcripts with computers, the vast majority using dot-matrix or other mechanical printers. You should usually expect the level of technology in document production to be fairly consistent within an educational system; implementation of computer technology is usually done across-the-board within an institution. Current transcripts from a given institution should not be of different types.

The presence of *correction fluid*, *burn marks*, or *erasures* should be a signal for careful checking. Depending on the level of technological sophistication in a given institution's method of document production, certain corrections may in fact appear in official documents (e.g., many Nigerian university transcripts are still typed with mechanical typewriters, and some typists simply correct typing errors rather than retype entire documents). Such valid corrections, however, apply to a very limited range of document types: in most instances, they should not be accepted at face value.

The use of *different type styles* in a typewritten or computer-printed document, especially for such critical information as an individual's name, a course grade, or a date of graduation, usually constitutes grounds for investigation. Most documents are produced in one sitting and at one location, so there is rarely any legitimate justification for this kind of internal inconsistency. For *handwritten* documents (usually filled-in forms), the same basic rule should apply.

Many documents include *photographs* attached to make positive identification easy. Sometimes these are stapled to the corner of a transcript; in some cases they are glued into a formal academic record (e.g., some Chinese graduate certificate fold-out books, university-issued Polish diplomas and index books, Mexican university titles and certificates of study). Where included, photos are just another cost of producing official documents; not surprisingly, the vast majority are black-and-white prints. Generally, you should not expect to see color prints from poor or war-torn countries; affixed photos should also be glued in their proper place in a formal document; signs of off-centered or re-glued photos should warrant concern for authenticity.

Most foreign academic documents contain *official stamps*, *raised seals*, and *official signatures* as signs of authenticity. In some cases (e.g., Colombia, Venezuela, Mexico), you should expect to see a large number of stamps and signatures. The appropriate *official letterhead* should also be present. An authentic document archive is especially useful in checking for the presence and location of these items in a document.

### Contextual Evidence

Detection of contextual aberrations or inconsistencies will depend largely upon your knowledge of foreign educational systems, not only in relation to documents but also in terms of policies, conventions (e.g., typical grading, date format), use of language, and schedules.

Despite the use of an official *grading* scale which ranges from the lowest to the highest possible grade, many countries (e.g., France, Greece, Peru) employ a "real" grading scale which places a definite ceiling on the highest grades that even the best students are awarded. In many cases, an unusually stellar record may signal fraud, even in the absence of physical evidence. Another type of exaggeration is program extension: course hours far in excess of the normal load, or perhaps an "extra" year of study tacked on.

Consultation with published sources and authentic documents will help you to spot anachronisms in documents. These can be of various kinds:

- applicants should not present a qualification awarded years after the program was discontinued at the awarding institution;
- documents dated 1985 should not have the signature of the academic registrar from 1965;
- current documents from re-named institutions should not arrive bearing only the old name of the institution; and so forth.

The "story" told in a document should make sense in three key ways: it should be internally consistent, it should conform with the known policies of the educational system and institution (e.g., you should not expect to receive a "U.S.-style" transcript from a country whose educational system exhibits little U.S. influence), and it should reflect the biographical facts for both the individual and the home country (e.g., date of applicant's birth in relation to his/her admission to or graduation from a program, disruption of studies during periods of war, national upheaval, or government shutdown of institutions).

### III. Recommended General Policies for Discouraging and Detecting Fraud

There may be no substitute for experience in detecting document fraud, but it is quite possible to adopt policies and assemble resources which will make it difficult for fraudulent documents to get beyond the application stage. We strongly recommend the following:

#### General Policies and Resources

**Deadlines** - Because of predictable delays in foreign correspondence, many institutions set earlier application deadlines for foreign applicants than for U.S. applicants. This extra time is useful for many purposes, not least of which is making document verification inquiries when needed (depending on the country in question, average correspondence turnaround time can vary from one week to several months). Your applicants can benefit from earlier deadlines in cases where you receive positive verification in time to admit them.

**Published Resources** - Many questions prompted by foreign documents can be answered with adequate published resources. Such details on documents as the names of school officials, institutional addresses, qualification names,

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**India**

The Indian educational system includes hundreds of universities, and most of these consist of affiliated or constituent colleges responsible for the actual teaching of degree programs. Students in turn are "externally" examined by the university itself, and official documents are the degree certificates and mark sheets issued by the university's Controller of Examinations rather than by the colleges.

The universities are autonomous institutions, and their degree certificates and mark sheets are internally designed; as such, there is considerable variation in the appearance of Indian documents among universities. Almost all of them employ some type of pre-printed form for mark sheets, which are then filled in by university officials. Depending on the institution, individual examination results may be handwritten, typewritten, or computer-printed.

Detecting document fraud requires careful checking of the physical evidence: handwriting styles should not be drastically different within a single document, nor should there be erasures or writing over correction fluid. Type-faces should be consistent. The signature/stamp of the Controller of Examinations should be present on official mark sheets. High grades are not uncommon in Indian programs, but if other evidence warrants investigation, the presence of numerous grades well above the highest passing mark may justify verification as well.

**Inauthentic Mark Sheet** ⇨

The marks at right attract attention on two counts. First, a mark of 25 has been crudely altered to a 75. Secondly, the 88 is an astronomically high mark; although possible, it has been altered from the original 38.

Roll No. /  
 St. No.] No. 818  
 Regd. No.

**ਗੁਰੂ ਨਾਨਕ ਦੇਵ ਯੂਨੀਵਰਸਿਟੀ**  
**Guru Nanak Dev University**

ਨਤੀਜਾ ਤੇ ਅੰਕ-ਵੇਰਵਾ ਕਾਰਡ  
**RESULT-CUM-DETAILED MARKS CARD**  
 ਬੈਚੁਲਰ ਆਫ ਕਾਮਰਸ ਭਾਗ I (12+3 ਸਿਖਿਆ-ਪ੍ਰਣਾਲੀ)  
 ਪਹਿਲਿਆ ਅਪਰੈਲ/ਸਤੰਬਰ, 19...  
**Bachelor of Commerce Part-I (12+3 System of Education)**  
**Examination, April/Sept. 19...**

ਨਾਮ :  
 ਪਿਤਾ ਦਾ ਨਾਮ :  
 Father's Name : Shri...

ਪੇਪਰ Paper	ਨਵਾ ਸਬਜੈਕਟ New Subject	ਪ੍ਰਾਪਤ ਅੰਕ Marks obtained	ਪ੍ਰਾਪਤ ਅੰਕ Minimum Pass Marks	ਕੁਝ ਅੰਕ Maximum Marks
I	ਅੰਗਰੇਜ਼ੀ (ਸੰਚਾਰ-ਸਿੱਖਿਆ ਕੌਸ਼ਲ) English (as Communication Skill)	22	18	50
II	ਭਾਰਤੀ ਅਰਥਸ਼ਾਸਤਰ Indian Economic Problems	75	75	100
III	ਕੋਸਟ ਆਕਾਊਂਟਿੰਗ Cost Accounting	88	35	100
IV	ਵਪਾਰ ਤੇ ਸਿਰਫ ਸੰਬੰਧਿਤ ਕਾਨੂੰਨ Commercial and Labour Law	52	35	100
V	ਭਾਰਤੀ ਸੰਖਿਅਕ ਸੰਸਾਰ-ਸ਼ਾਸਤਰ ਤੇ ਭਾਰਤੀ ਸੰਖਿਅਕ ਸੰਸਾਰ-ਸ਼ਾਸਤਰ Business Mathematics & Quantitative Analysis	61	35	100
VI	ਪ੍ਰਬੰਧਨ ਸੰਸਾਰ-ਸ਼ਾਸਤਰ ਤੇ ਪ੍ਰਬੰਧਨ ਸੰਸਾਰ-ਸ਼ਾਸਤਰ Principles and Practice of Management	42	35	100
VII	ਪੰਜਾਬੀ (ਜ਼ਰੂਰੀ) Punjabi (Compulsory) OR ਪੰਜਾਬ ਦਾ ਇਤਿਹਾਸ ਤੇ ਸੱਭਿਆਚਾਰ Punjab History & Culture	28	18	50

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and program structures can be checked against the information you will find in comprehensive volumes like the *International Handbook of Universities*, the *World of Learning*, and the *Commonwealth Universities Yearbook*. There are other specialist publications which deal with degree mills and altered documents

**Develop Your Own Customized Document Library -**

Useful as they are, many published sources will not provide sufficient detail to satisfy all questions about documents. Official, authentic documents acquired from abroad offer an additional source of information and should be retained as needed for use in making comparisons. Some document formats are specific to entire educational systems, some are institution-specific, and some are even faculty-specific. Having a set of authentic documents covering a long span of time will keep you alert to document format changes and enable you to spot aberrations.

**Human Resources/Language** - If you are not multi-lingual but must deal with a range of foreign-language

documents, you should develop a cadre of on-campus people who can assist you with translation questions as needed. Translations submitted by translation agencies are useful but can vary widely in quality and accuracy, and you should avoid being overly dependent upon them. A number of the AACRAO *World Education Series* country volumes contain helpful glossaries, but these may not be adequate in all cases: you should supplement glossaries with additional terms where they exist and create them where they don't exist. Network with your local colleagues in international admissions: one person's high-volume applicant country can be another's obscure rarity. Recent changes in foreign educational policies can take time to appear in convenient print form in the U.S.: you can contact international institutions such as the Institute of International Education, the British Council, or AMIDEAST to get up-to-date facts. Credential evaluation services will also provide you with information.

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## Obtaining and Releasing Documents

In systems where official transcripts are issued (e.g., Taiwan, Philippines), request that applicants have them sent. They should arrive directly from the official source; note that in many cases the official source of documents is not the teaching institution (e.g., Indian colleges affiliated to universities may issue documents for their students, but the "official" documents you should obtain are the mark sheets issued by the university itself).

Direct your mail-room staff to retain *envelopes with stamps* for all foreign educational documents that arrive at your office. Official foreign documents should not arrive from U.S. addresses or from friends or relatives of the applicant in the home country.

In a number of cases, "transcripts" *per se* are not the documents you want from an applicant (e.g., a British secondary school graduate should send you official results from the General Certificate of Secondary Education examination issued by the relevant examining board or submit the original certificate itself for you to review and photocopy). You must familiarize yourself with the official sources and names of documents in a given educational system in order to know what to ask for.

Often the applicant is in possession of the official document you need, usually in cases where the home country issues an earned certificate or diploma only once (e.g., in France, secondary and post-secondary certificates and diplomas are issued only once; the fact that duplicates are not issued is often stated right on the document, and students who need copies of their documents are advised to have photocopies made and notarized by state officials).

When possible, you should request to see original documents from your applicants, photocopy these in your office and return the originals. In cases where the applicant is not near your institution and is (understandably) reluctant to part with an irreplaceable document, you may wish to accept copies. Students admitted on the basis of such documents should be required to present the originals to your office upon their arrival at your institution and prior to initial registration.

In educational systems where a significant time lapse exists between a student's graduation and the issuance of final official results to the student (secondary examinations, degree certificates, etc.), you may wish to accept a statement of provisional or preliminary results for making an admission decision. Conditional admission can be granted pending your receipt of the final documents, as above.

The transmission of official documents from foreign institutions to U.S. colleges and universities is often accompanied by a formal request from the foreign institution that documents not be released (or even shown) to the applicant under any circumstances. Many countries do not operate under laws which provide students with rights of access to their academic records. Nevertheless, foreign applicants in the U.S. may approach officials here and request that the documents be released to them for various reasons. There

are good reasons why your institution may not wish to adopt an iron-clad "no release" policy; responsible officials should consider a number of questions when weighing the merits of a release request, including:

- Would your institution accept documents originally mailed to other U.S. institutions from abroad? If you won't take them, should you give them?

- If you decide to release a document, should you release the original document itself? A photocopy? Should you mark the document with a stamp or signature indicating its release from your office?

- If your applicant wants the document for presentation to a third party (e.g., a potential employer), should you send it to that individual yourself? If you send the document, should you include a request that the document not be released to your applicant?

- Have you reasonably weighed the request of the sending institution for non-release against the request of your applicant? Do you receive many transcripts from the sending institution?

## IV. Verifying Documents

With a few exceptions, countries have become much more accessible in the last few years. Even in those countries which remain closed or hostile to the U.S. and some other nations, individual institutions may be surprisingly responsive to inquiries. With access now so improved, the professional in international education can function more confidently and should not hesitate to ask for verification. Even though responses may be slow in coming, it is important to persist in communication attempts.

In Africa, rapid communication is rare, with turn-around time averaging one to three months. Somalia and Rwanda are so devastated by war that their educational systems have been totally disrupted. Algeria also is an uncertain source, as are some institutions in Egypt.

In Latin America, Cuba's institutions rarely respond, but the government in Haiti will answer questions on secondary education within a month or two. Getting responses from certain faculties in Haiti's higher institutions ranges from difficult to impossible.

In the Mideast, Iran and Iraq seldom respond to inquiries from the United States, but Lebanon is once again accessible. Syria and Afghanistan generally do not respond.

In Asia, Vietnam is improving but still difficult. Offices are open in Myanmar and should respond to inquiries.

In Eastern Europe, some republics of the former Yugoslavia are too devastated to respond. In the former Soviet Union, only a few of the former republics may be unresponsive. Russia, Ukraine and the Baltic states all respond.

If you determine that a document submitted to you may be fraudulent, you should contact the appropriate authority for verification of authenticity (or lack thereof), enclosing a good photocopy of the document in question. In all such cases, you should obtain the address and title of the appropriate official from an independent source (i.e., *not* from the

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suspect document). By contacting the proper authority, you also have the best chance of uncovering "inside job" frauds. Diploma mill products, which are inherently fraudulent, must usually be verified as such by research.

## V. How To Handle Fraud

A common part of the administrative code of U.S. colleges and universities is the section concerning academic fraud. Document fraud usually comes under this heading, although in most cases the code is limited to a discussion of fraud committed during enrollment (e.g., plagiarism). When you expose document fraud in the admission process, you must consider the limit of what you have learned, namely, that the document you have received is not authentic.

"Forgery," the term usually tossed about in these circumstances, is actually a legal term fraught with serious implications: verification of a document's lack of authenticity would not be sufficient to prove the accusation one makes by using the term "forgery." Therefore, never use the term "forgery" when notifying an applicant that a non-authentic document is contained in his/her application. You should, however, develop a definite policy for handling such cases when they arise.

### Subsidiary Issues: Use and Abuse of Translations

When dealing with foreign-language documents, it frequently may be useful to request translations into English. The preferred source for translations should be the foreign institutions themselves, many of which will issue transcripts in English for their students going to study abroad even if English is not the official language of the country or the language of instruction (e.g., China, Egypt, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Thailand). The other option is some third party such as diplomatic officials, translation agencies, private individu-

als, etc. Third-party translations can vary enormously in quality and accuracy, and should never be accepted without the original documents upon which they were based.

When asking for a translation, emphasize that you want it to be word-for-word literal, as a number of translators will take it upon themselves to "interpret" various terms (thus, in the wrong hands the Latin American *título de bachiller* becomes a "bachelor's degree" instead of a "title of bachelor" and a *título de técnico en ingeniería mecánica* becomes a "title of bachelor in mechanical engineering technology" instead of "title of technician..."). Equivalency statements disguised as "translations" are worse than unhelpful.

\* Particularly bad translations, especially when issued by fee-collecting private agencies in the U.S., should lead to formal letters of complaint from your office to the translator: you may also wish to circulate copies of your letter (along with samples of bad translations) among colleagues as a warning to be on guard.

### Degree/Diploma Mills

In a class by themselves, degree/diploma mills typically require the payment of a fee (the amount can vary widely) in exchange for documents purporting to represent academic study at a range of levels. A fool's game, perhaps, but one which an applicant may invite you to play by submitting such documents for your consideration.

By going through the standard document-checking procedures detailed above, you should at least be able to determine from the outset that a given diploma mill document is highly questionable, even if your knowledge of a country's educational system is limited. Further investigation will usually lead you to the actual status of such institutions as the (British) "Sussex College of Technology" or (Indian) "Eastern Orthodox University." There are various published lists of known or suspected U.S. and foreign degree mills worth having in your office library. ■

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 Also, see publications issued by the Council of Europe, an intergovernmental agency based in Strasbourg, France.

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