

Protecting Australia's Higher Education System: A Proactive Versus Reactive Approach in Review (1999–2004)

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A review of unauthorised higher education provision in Australia has found that twenty-seven providers have attempted to offer programs in Australia in the period 1999 to 2004, with an additional eight claiming some level of association with Australia at the present time. During this period of review, articles in a variety of higher education publications have suggested that some of these entities could be 'degree mills' or 'diploma mills'. The author argues that such a simple labelling process cannot fully explain the phenomenon, and a variety of information must be presented in order to assess each entity. Notwithstanding this, the brief overview provided for each unapproved provider suggests that it is important that a proactive, continual monitoring approach needs to be employed at both a state and federal level. It is suggested that an official register of past and present unauthorised providers be developed and maintained in a central location, so that prospective local and overseas students may make an informed decision regarding study providers. Tools to prosecute unauthorised providers, enacted via the National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes in 2000, now provide a clear deterrent. The author recommends that these, along with a range of authoritative guidebooks, government web sites and online resources, provide for a proactive approach to minimising problems in this area and should be promoted to all providers of higher education in Australia.

1. Introduction

This paper aims to provide a brief account of the author's research conducted over the past five years in order to address the increase of unauthorised providers attempting to recruit students and deliver qualifications from, and into, Australia.

The paper commences by defining the problem at hand regarding Internet degree/diploma mills, providing an overview of two main types of models and the difficulties encountered when trying to draw exact definitions. An overview of unauthorised providers is then presented, outlining past and present activity, which has been brought to the attention of both state and federal authorities for review. The paper concludes with a range of recommendations for further proactive measures to be employed by both state and federal government officials.

2. Defining the Degree/Diploma Mill Quandary: A Global Problem Requiring a Local Solution

Much publicity surrounding the growth of unapproved providers of higher education either operating in Australia, or delivering programs offshore into Australia, has drawn journalists and writers to use the terms 'degree mill' or 'diploma mill', mostly synonymously. Such terms, inherited from the United States of America where degree/diploma mills are rife, have been used loosely, and little care has been taken in attempting to employ differentiating nomenclature in order to inform both governments and the prospective student on how these organisations work. It is important to appreciate that there are many definitions and subsets of degree/diploma mills operating, either as physical campuses or totally online organisations. Unfortunately, as the US Select Committee on the Ageing (Fraudulent Credentials, 1985) rightly asserts, there are no definitive criteria to characterise the constitution of a diploma/degree mill as it is imperative that a variety of evidence must be presented to form a conclusion. Notwithstanding this, in searching for a working typology, Snyder (1974) and Patrick O'Neill (1991) suggest there are two types, to which the author ascribes.

Firstly, citing the 'briefcase college' definition as espoused by Patrick O'Neill (1991, p. 82), or 'Type 1' as suggested by Snyder (1974), these particular organisations operate from mailboxes, mail forwarding or telephone answering services. Offering degrees at all levels in all disciplines, they sell degrees under fictitious names of non-existent universities or sell testamurs that resemble degrees from bona fide institutions. In addition to this, some sell transcripts, letters of recommendation (Spille, Stewart & Sullivan, 1997), class rings, graduation photos and yearbooks (Patrick O'Neill, 1991).

The second type is those which operate as non-traditional (Arnsetin, 1982) or 'Type 2' institutions, sharing attributes of the Type 1 model, 'but with some token work involved and all by correspondence' (Snyder, 1974, p. 93). Defined as 'universities without walls' these are difficult to differentiate from legitimate institutions as they 'emulate a legitimate non-traditional program, including accreditation from a phony agency, yet post standards' (Patrick O'Neill, 1991, p. 82). Levicoff (2000) subscribes to the Type 1 and Type 2 definitions, suggesting the two terms 'degree mill' and 'diploma mill' should be separated. He argues that a diploma mill is a school that will sell a degree or diploma outright, or a school that requires such a minimal amount of work (such as a 10-page dissertation for a doctorate). On the other hand, he sees a degree mill as a school that actually requires some academic work, perhaps even a substantial amount, but significantly less than comparable, legitimately accredited programs (Levicoff, 2000).

An extensive body of literature exists covering the broad characteristics which typical degree/diploma mills possess; however, none endeavour to break these down into the Type 1 or Type 2 models as described above. Bear and Bear (2003) list, in alphabetical order, over 21 pages of degree/diploma mills that have either been closed down due to fraudulent activity or still operate and have been exposed by various publications; there are, however, no explicit criteria on how they are classified in this section of their publication. To assist in definitions, Levicoff (1992) has suggested over 75 criteria for the identification of a degree/diploma mill, whilst Porter (1972) and Stewart and Spille (1988) provide a comprehensive list of qualities most degree mills possess.

For the purposes of this paper the writer has deliberately refrained from labelling the below-mentioned unauthorised providers of higher education as either degree mills or diploma mills. Each entity possesses its own characteristics, and it is beyond the scope of this paper to analyse each organisation in detail and apply such nomenclature. What is important, however, is the authority (or lack of) to offer and grant degrees in Australia, and is the most important criterion governing the listed organisations. In order to remedy this problem, the National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes were enacted in 2000, and have since provided an avenue to prosecute and regulate offshore providers. Prior to the National Protocols, Kemp (1999, p. 5) found, amidst four other major weaknesses in the accreditation/quality assurance framework that there was '...a lack of coherence in policies and procedures for the accreditation of institutions and courses'. As such, this promoted the development of the protocols which were endorsed by the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs on 31 March 2000. Seen to be an integral part of the new national quality assurance framework, the protocols were required to be written into mainland state and territory legislation by 30 June 2001. The protocols were designed to ensure two main outcomes:

- to protect the title 'university' across all states and territories of Australia and ensure its use is commensurate with a nationally agreed definition
- to establish uniform processes for the creation and ongoing accreditation/quality assurance of universities in Australia and for other providers seeking to offer higher education awards in Australia.

The following section profiles a range of unauthorised providers that have challenged the new standards and their application by state and territory regulators.

3. A Review of Unauthorised Providers of Higher Education in Australia: 1999 to Present Day

Commencing in 1998, and for no apparent reason, a number of offshore providers attempted to deliver programs into Australia. Dean Wells, the then Minister for Education in Queensland, Australia, announced that over nine organisations in Queensland alone had been issued with warning letters (AAP, 1998a), adding that Australia's reputation as a quality provider of higher education would be compromised if this were left to continue (AAP, 1998b).

Concerned with the clear lack of adequate legislation and focused approach to this problem, the author endeavoured to trace and research various providers delivering degrees either on Australian soil, or delivered by distance mode into Australia. The author joined forces with a group of like-minded individuals spread across the globe, and through the use of newsgroups (such as alt.education.distance), the Internet, and in particular an information site called DegreeInfo.com (<http://www.degreeinfo.com>), the author aimed to seek out and monitor higher education activity that could possibly attract Australian students.

The following is, to the author's best knowledge, a listing of providers that purported to offer degrees from within, and into, Australia from early 1999 to the present day, and have not been authorised via appropriate legislation. The listing has been broken down into past providers that are no longer operating in Australia or have refrained from operating into Australia, and present providers that still have some presence in an Australian jurisdiction. Whilst the National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes have now been written into all mainland and territory legislation (Western Australia being close to final approval), it is the author's understanding that none of the following entities have been prosecuted.

Notwithstanding this, it is the author's aspiration that the listing will become an official register of unauthorised higher education activity, which may be used as a future research tool and maintained as a work in progress.

3.1 *Not currently operating in Australia / Offering degrees into Australia:*

American Coastline University (various locations) <http://www.amercoastuniv.edu>

On 18 March 2001, American Coastline University claimed to have an operating office in Australia called a 'Professional Development Institute'. Whilst no actual location details were provided, it clearly appeared that the programs were being marketed and delivered in Australia. American Coastline University, at this time, operated from mailbox rental services in both Hawaii and Louisiana, and administrative services were provided from the same offices as the now defunct Summit University of Louisiana. The web page, after some direct questions to the then owner of American Coastline University, Dr Richard Hoyer, subsequently vanished.

Australian Institute for Coordinated Research (New South Wales [NSW] and Victoria) [http://german.alumni.net/Australia - Oceania/Australia/New_South_Wales/Sydney/Australian Institute for Coordinated Research](http://german.alumni.net/Australia - Oceania/Australia/New_South_Wales/Sydney/Australian_Institute_for_Coordinated_Research)

Recently discovered in February 2004, this 'Institute' apparently conferred honorary doctorates at one time, circa 1994. It is unclear where in NSW or Victoria it was located, who ran it, or how it operated, but the individuals identified who obtained these doctorates have now removed the 'honorary degrees' from their respective web sites. An alumni.net site is currently active, suggesting the address is at 10 Manning Road, Sydney, NSW, Australia.

Blacks Professionals (Queensland) <http://www.kxm.net/blacks/introduction.html> (URL broken)

Blacks Professionals was identified in 1999 as a provider of replica testamurs, operating out of Queensland, and offered fake parchments from universities throughout the world, including Australia. The operation was exposed in a story through *Campus Review*, and the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee made enquiries whereupon it disappeared. A domain name called

<http://www.fakedegrees.com> was created in 2000, with registrant details providing Blacks Professional, this time with an address in Spain.

Business Institute of Victoria (Victoria) No URL available

In 1999, the Institute purported to offer an MBA in Victoria without the appropriate accreditation. The Institute also had a campus in Vanuatu; however, it declared bankruptcy and disappeared soon after this time.

Chancery International University (NSW) <http://www.chanceryiu.net>

A variety of articles appeared in the *Australian* in August 2002, profiling Chancery International University. The web site was registered in Luxembourg, but the main 'physical and postal addresses', including phone numbers, were located in Werrington Downs, NSW, and Townsville, Queensland. Offering a range of degrees in all disciplines, the site soon disappeared after adverse publicity. Chancery International University is currently listed on the NSW register of unrecognised universities located at <http://www.highered.nsw.gov.au/reports/notapproved.htm>

CNBC University (NSW) <http://www.cnbcu.com/cnbcu.html>

CNBC University is a corporate university operated by the CNBC television channel in the USA and offers corporate, non-award courses in investigative journalism. It is currently listed on the NSW register of unrecognised universities located at <http://www.highered.nsw.gov.au/reports/notapproved.htm> as it has not sought approval to operate as a university in NSW.

eBay University (NSW) <http://pages.ebay.com/university>

A corporate university operated by eBay.com offering non-award courses in buying and selling techniques. eBay University is currently listed on the NSW register of unrecognised universities located at <http://www.highered.nsw.gov.au/reports/notapproved.htm> as it has not sought approval to operate as a university in NSW.

Greenwich University (Norfolk Island) <http://www.greenwich.edu> (URL broken)

Greenwich University is perhaps one of the most controversial universities, appearing on the Territory of Norfolk Island in late 1998. Empowered to confer its own degrees via an Act of Parliament assented to by the then Minister for Territories, Senator Ian Macdonald, questions were raised regarding the due diligence and quality processes undertaken to confer self-accrediting powers on the university. Whilst it was awarded its own Act, it was not listed on the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) register; hence, it was not recognised as an official Australian university offering AQF qualifications. Legislation passed in November 2002 overrode the Act and the university chose not to seek re-approval. It subsequently relocated to California and then, to its original location, Hawaii.

Golden State University (Victoria) <http://www.goldenstateuniversity.edu>

Golden State University appeared on the Internet in August 2002, and was registered in the British Virgin Islands but run from a Melbourne home. Former Vice-Chancellor of Greenwich University (see above), Ian MacKechnie, allegedly ran the university from his home, as the contact details for the web site provided his Australian mobile phone number. After a rather unflattering array of articles published by the *Australian* newspaper, the contact details for Australia vanished.

Ikon Institute (Western Australia) <http://www.ikoninstitute.com>

In early 2003, this organisation was found to have been offering Masters and Doctoral programs without the appropriate approvals. The Institute is currently seeking approval to operate as a Registered Training Organisation and the postgraduate programs have been removed from their web site.

Illawarra College (NSW) <http://www.illawarracollege.edu> (URL broken)

In late 2001, this NSW registered college purported to offer undergraduate and postgraduate degrees whilst in transition to seek operations in Franklin, New Hampshire, and Wintergreen, Virginia, USA. The college now appears to be closed.

Kings University (Western Australia) <http://www.kusm.info>

A Medical and Management University, supposedly based in the Solomon Islands, the university used a telephone and PO Box in Perth, Western Australia, as at February 2004. Exposed as a major concern by all authorities, the contact details are now empty.

Oracle University (Australian Capital Territory) <http://education.oracle.com>

Oracle University was advertised in the *Canberra Times* (27 March 2000; 10 April 2000) and purported to deliver courses into the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) and other states of Australia. Oracle provided an ACT contact number for more details. Whilst they did not deliver higher degrees and purport to be a degree-granting institution, Oracle used the word 'University' in its business name.

Pacific International University (Victoria) <http://www.pacificuniversity.com>

Pacific International University had its roots in Melbourne, Australia, and in 1993 obtained accreditation from the Higher Education Division of Victoria to offer Masters and PhD level qualifications. This accreditation was short lived though, and the university relocated to Missouri, USA. For a period of time it still maintained a Victorian address for correspondence and delivery; however, this was removed due to pressure from the Victorian Office of Tertiary Education and Training. In the USA, where it still operates today, it claims accreditation from the 'American Accrediting Association of Theological Institutions Inc.', an unrecognised accrediting agency.

St Clements University (South Australia) <http://www.stclements.edu>

Operated by an Australian, based in Adelaide, St Clements University is a company incorporated in the Turks and Caicos Islands, British West Indies. At one time it stated that its main office was in Adelaide, Australia; however, this was removed after being contacted by the South Australian Accreditation and Registration Council. The web site is still registered to a PO Box in Prospect, South Australia.

The Australasian Institute <http://www.tai.edu.au> (URL broken)

The Australasian Institute made claims in 1999 that it was endorsed by the University of Ballarat and had full approval to offer the Global Master of Business Administration. This was soon proven to be misleading, and TAI was forced by the Australian Competition and Consumer Competition to post a retraction. The organisation now appears to have disappeared.

The Open University in Australia (South Australia) No URL available

Provided only an address and telephone number in the White Pages to a house in Adelaide, South Australia. Enquiries were greeted by a quick 'Hello?'

The University of Action Learning (now called Revans University) (NSW) <http://www.revans-university.edu/html/revans.asp>

The University of Action Learning (Boulder, Colorado, USA) once purported to offer its programs in NSW. A Distance Education and Training Council (DETC) accredited university, it is authorised and accredited to offer programs to Masters Degree level in the United States. Revans University is currently listed on the NSW register of unrecognised universities located at <http://www.highered.nsw.gov.au/reports/notapproved.htm> as it has not sought approval to offer degrees in NSW.

Trinity College and University (Western Australia) <http://www.degreeconsultants.com> (URL broken)

In 2000, Trinity College and University (an organisation based in the USA) purported to have a contact and delivery agent in Western Australia. A large exposé on one 'Dr Gary Jackson' revealed his degrees had been obtained through the UK- and USA-based Trinity College and University entities, whereupon Dr Jackson resigned from his position at a high-profile college in Perth and his web page vanished.

University of Asia (South Australia and Northern Territory) <http://www.uniasia.edu> (URL broken)

Operated by one Professor, Dr Bilal Nasrullah, of Campbelltown, South Australia, the University of Asia was registered on the Turks and Caicos Islands in 1997. It claimed a range of accreditations from an array of unrecognised accrediting agencies, mostly created by the university itself. The university 'moved' to the Northern Territory when it came under scrutiny in South Australia. Pressure was subsequently made to pull down the site, and an office was maintained for a brief time in New York before it disappeared off the Internet in 2001.

The Seven Ray Institute—University of The Seven Rays (South Australia) <http://www.sevenray.com>

Claiming to have delivered the Master of Science—Esoteric Psychology (MSE) in South Australia since 1990, the University of The Seven Rays (USR) is a tax-exempt, non-profit, religious university 'without-walls' registered in New Jersey, USA. The university is not accredited by any recognised accrediting agency. The prerequisite for entry into the Masters program was to attend a three-day seminar in Adelaide, Brisbane, Melbourne or Sydney. The South Australian connection was the 'Australian School of Esoteric Astrology' (or also known as the Australian College of Trans-Himalayan Wisdom), which was the USR's Australian headquarters and the co-sponsor of the USR's programs in Australia. This school was affiliated with the 'Esoteric Sciences & Creative Education Foundation Inc.'. All mention of an Australian presence disappeared in 2001.

Virtualuni.com.au (Victoria) <http://www.virtualuni.com.au> (URL broken)

The Virtualuni.com.au web site was created in October 1998, with contact details in New Zealand and Melbourne, Australia. The site also had a sister site, <http://www.cyberuni.org> where the operations of Kavil University were going to be offered. Little activity occurred, and the site eventually disappeared at the end of 2000.

Warnborough University (NSW) <http://www.warnborough.edu>

Warnborough University operates as a 'global university', claiming not to belong to any jurisdiction. Its main campus is in the United Kingdom, whilst it was incorporated as a company in the Republic of Ireland in 1997. It does not appear to have any recognised accreditation to offer degrees, apart from its own articles of incorporation. At one time the university offered degrees through the Power Business Institute and Websters Training Academy in NSW; however, these were not approved programs. The owner of Warnborough University, Dr Brendan Tempest-Mogg, is an Australian, and maintains an 'Australia update' page at <http://www.warnborough.edu/general/updates/ozupdate.htm> regarding Warnborough University activity for Australia. The university is currently listed on the NSW register of unrecognised universities located at <http://www.highered.nsw.gov.au/reports/notapproved.htm>

Washington International University (national) <http://www.washint.edu>

Washington International University was advertised in the *Australian* newspaper in January 2001 and January 2004. The degrees offered by this university are unaccredited and delivered entirely by distance. Concerns were raised and voiced to the *Australian*, with Senator Kim Carr raising questions in Senates Estimates; however, it is unclear whether the paper will accept further

advertising from this entity. The university operates from a mail forwarding service in Pennsylvania, USA.

Western Washington State University / Western Washington International University (NSW) <http://www.wwsu.edu> and <http://www.wwiu.edu> (URLs broken)

In March 2001, this university appeared with a head office in Atlanta, Georgia, USA, and an administrative office located at 4/12 May Street, Eastwood, NSW 2122. It only survived several weeks before its web sites were closed down.

3.2 *Claiming some level of association with Australia at the present time:*

Berkeley Australia International University (Queensland) <http://berkeleyuniversity.net> (URL broken)

With the university called 'Berkeley Australia International' or Berkeley International University, this organisation advertises heavily into Asia. An 'Australian Tour' page promotes study tours into Australia, whilst the main contact address is provided as 89, The Village Avenue, Coopers Plains, Brisbane 4108 – Queensland Australia. Students are assured that the 'Berkeley Australia Office is the Management office for BIU USA to handle the Asian region, but does not offer any Degree courses in Australia'. (Note: at the time of publication of this paper, the URL was broken and the status of this entity was unknown.)

Calamus International University via the O'Keefe School Hypnotherapy Psychotherapy Counselling Training (NSW) <http://www.tracieokeefe.com/Oshap/hypdegrees.htm>

Calamus International University (<http://www.unicalamus.org/>), a company incorporated on the Turks and Caicos Islands, offers a range of degrees in conjunction with the O'Keefe School of Hypnotherapy Counselling Training located in NSW. Both entities do not have the authority to offer degrees in NSW; however, the PhD in 'Sex, Gender and Sexuality' appears most interesting!

Carleton College & University (Western Australia) <http://www.carltoncu.com>

This university appears to be a non-operational entity, perhaps a clone of an existing American university web site, copied for later use. The site is live and provides contact details as follows:

*Carlton College & University
Australia PO Box 446 Morley,
Western Australia 6943
Tel: Int+61 8 9377 4819 Fax: Int+61 8 9473 0277*

The contact phone number is answered 'Hello?' by a young boy, who knows nothing about the university's operation or existence.

International University of America (Norfolk Island) <http://www.merc-iaa.ac>

Whilst having no physical operation on Norfolk Island, this entity claims to be originally founded and incorporated as a university in the State of California, USA, in 1980 and now domiciled in Norfolk Island, Australia. It claims to have a campus in London, and has links to Calamus International University (see above). The International University of America is not an approved university to operate on the Territory of Norfolk Island.

National Australian Institute of Science and Technology (NAIST) (Western Australia) <http://www.naistechnology.com.au>

Whilst claiming not to have Australian accreditation (as it does not deliver courses in Australia), NAIST offers graduate and postgraduate degrees offshore with no apparent accreditation. An

exposé by the *Sunday Times* in Western Australia revealed a string of allegations and issues. NAIST claimed an association at one stage with Warnborough College, Malaysia.

Tyndale College (NSW and Victoria) <http://www.tyndalecollege.org> and <http://hhcc.customer.netspace.net.au>

Tyndale College claims to be a teaching institution of the Central School of Religion, London. This school, according to Bear (2003), was identified as a degree mill by *Education & Training Magazine*. The State of Indiana's Commission on Proprietary Education also has questions regarding the school. Tyndale College (aka The Australasian Open Theological College Ltd) has been operating since 1996, incorporated in the State of NSW as a non-profit educational institution. Tyndale College is not accredited to offer degrees in either NSW or Victoria.

West Coast Institute of Management & Technology (WCIMT) (*Western Australia*) <http://www.westcoastinstitute.com.au>

Offering a range of programs, both undergraduate and postgraduate, these degrees are not recognised in Australia, and it is unclear on the accreditation status of WCIMT overseas. WCIMT claims accreditation from a range of unrecognised accrediting agencies, and presently appears to be expanding, with the following web sites and operations overseas:

<http://www.wcimt.com.au>

http://www.wcimt.us/global_partnerships.htm

<http://www.wcimt.us>

<http://www.wccmt.co.uk>

<http://www.uncedu.us>

<http://www.uofh.us> & <http://uhedu.net>

Yorkshire University Pty Ltd (Queensland) <http://www.yorkshire-university.com> and <http://www.securitytraining.net>

Whilst this organisation has removed all mention of its Queensland office and Australian ownership from its main web site, it still maintains a downloadable application form for Master and Doctoral programs on its main Australian site at <http://www.securitytraining.net/PDF/YU.PDF>

The company is incorporated in Vanuatu; however, in November 2003, it claimed to have operating offices in Queensland and Delaware, USA. This has since been removed.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

Similar to the myriad other industries that have now been globalised by the advent of the Internet, legitimate higher education provision in Australia is prone to abuse by unauthorised providers. Whilst coherent, standard legislation to protect and prosecute in this area now exists, it is imperative that both State and Commonwealth 'gatekeepers' of higher education take a proactive approach to ensuring equity in the market.

The Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) is to be commended on providing an alert page to warn and to provide a reporting mechanism for unauthorised providers, and is located at <http://www.dest.gov.au/highered/alert/default.htm#Fake>. At a state level, NSW has taken the lead, providing the site <http://www.det.nsw.edu.au/aboutus/higheredu/fakedegrees.htm>, which warns of fake degrees, of both Type 1 and Type 2 models, and provides an alert email address. As an extra step, NSW has created a register of providers that are not permitted to offer degrees in the state, and is located at <http://www.highered.nsw.gov.au/reports/notapproved.htm>

It is the author's strong recommendation that a national approach be adopted to alert both overseas and local students to the various unrecognised providers—utilising a register similar to that provided in this paper—and build on the information pages provided on the DEST and NSW Department of Education and Training web sites.

As a result of unauthorised higher education provision, all accredited Australian providers need to be vigilant and protect themselves from accepting transfer credits from Type 1 and/or Type 2 organisations. This may be facilitated by utilising resources such as the Country Education Profiles, released by the National Office of Overseas Skills Recognition (Weeks, 1991); The International Handbook of Universities (International Association of Universities, 1993); The Commonwealth Universities Yearbook (Association of Commonwealth Universities and Association of Universities of the British Commonwealth); and The World Education Series (World Education Series, n.d.). Other online resources can be accessed, with the most useful being DegreeInfo (<http://www.degreeinfo.com>), an entertaining yet rich environment where questions may be posed regarding the existence, legitimacy and accreditation/degree-granting authority of any university or college that is found.

For the future, the author will remain vigilant, patrolling the Internet highway, and remain dedicated to protecting Australia's higher education system.

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