

Degrees of deceit

St Regis ran a truly global scam, writes **Yojana Sharma**

It was the largest case of degree fraud in America, perhaps the world. The investigation into St Regis University, a huge degree mill, ended in jail sentences for its "founders" and some employees in July, and has cast light on the lengths to which sellers of dodgy degrees will go to ensnare people in their web of deceit.

St Regis' tentacles spread around the globe, with clients across Europe, Russia, the Middle East and Asia, including Hong Kong.

"This was an eight-agency federal criminal prosecution, involving more than 100 countries, 66 real universities known to have had their degrees counterfeited and 150 separate bogus institutions set up by the perpetrators," said George Gollin, professor of physics at the University of Illinois. He had been monitoring the degree mill since 2002 and passed on a great deal of information to investigators that led to the convictions.

"It is the first case of its kind where we have so much information, so we have an extensive profile of how they operated internationally," he said.

A statement from the US Department of Justice said St Regis' customers included teachers, psychologists, engineers and at least one college president. "Many were shipped abroad. The annual degree output from St Regis was about the same as a medium-sized American university," it said.

Investigators calculated that the organisers netted at least US\$7.3 million from the sales.

"It was the most sophisticated degree mill because they had 125 different websites of high [secondary] schools, colleges, accredited entities, degree transcript storage and credential evaluation companies," said Allen Ezell, a former FBI agent who has investigated degree mills.

"We now have a better insight into how big this was and how many sales were in the various countries and the type of degrees in demand."

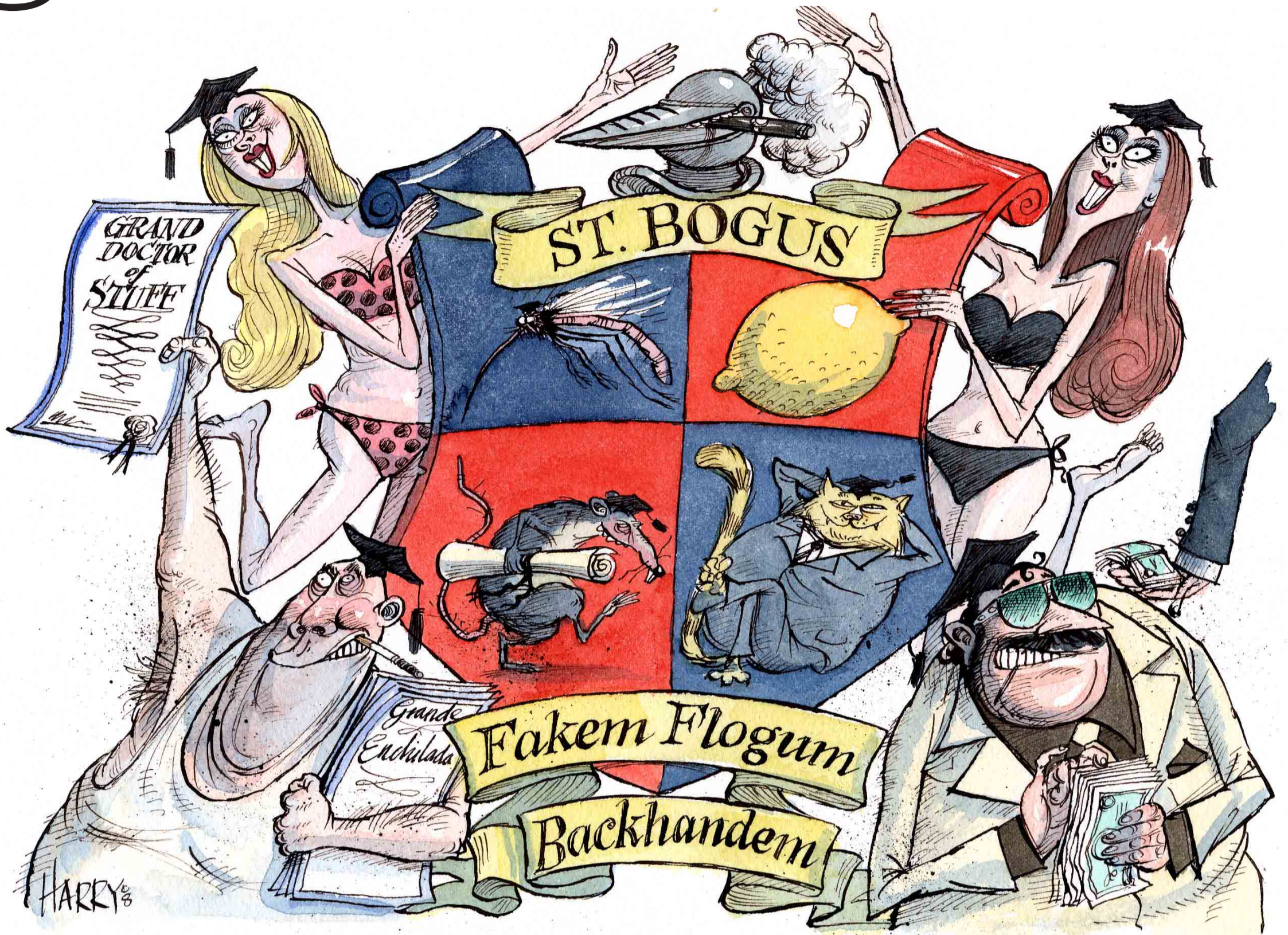
According to documents unearthed by federal investigators, some 30 Hong Kong people wittingly or unwittingly acquired fake degrees, although several Hong Kong individuals bought more than one degree in the space of a very short period, suggesting they knew very well what they were doing.

Although the vast majority of degrees – more than 9,000 – were sold in the US, large numbers were sold to Britain, Canada, India and Germany. Hong Kong was the 15th largest buyer among 130 states and territories, just behind Malaysia, Singapore and Pakistan.

However, it was the large number of Middle Eastern buyers that first attracted the attention of the US Department of Homeland Security because of fears the degrees might be used to gain admission to US higher degree programmes, or for immigration purposes.

The most popular were degrees in business administration, "because it can be universally applied in all forms in the workplace", Mr Ezell said.

"But they even operated St Luke's Medical School – they put MDs out there on the street. These were medical degrees that were not just to hang on the wall, they were going to use them."



Tie-ups blurring the line between real and fake

St Regis is not the only institution to have cast a shadow over the academic world in the past year.

In January, Britain's higher education watchdog, Universities UK, called for urgent action to root out unaccredited education providers following a BBC television investigation into Irish International University (IIU).

Described by Irish authorities as "neither Irish nor a university", it moved from Britain and Ireland, first to Malaysia and, following an investigation, is increasingly operating out of Cambodia, with organisers boasting that the Cambodian prime minister had

attended one of their functions. "It has set up related websites to provide cover," said an investigator with Naric UK, which is responsible for providing information and expert opinion on vocational, academic and professional skills.

"It seems they have found a way to set up links between them and genuine organisations. On their websites they say they are recognised, but when the student has finished the course they say they are not recognised," said Ning Guan, head of data and research at Naric UK.

IIU has been advertising in Hong Kong, but it is unclear how many

students it has recruited. Mr Ning said the institution had been seeking legitimacy since the BBC documentary.

Links with Build Bright University, Cambodia's largest private university, are now causing concern, with BBU charging several thousand US dollars for a "twin" doctorate from BBU and IIU.

"The line is getting blurred because now they are getting into genuine education that will make it difficult to unravel which aspects are genuinely recognised," a Naric investigator said.

Yojana Sharma

Of 29 degrees known to have been shipped to Hong Kong, almost a third were business degrees, including doctorates, according to court papers.

The degree mill operated from the late 1990s until 2005 when the ringleaders, Steve Randock and his wife Dixie Randock, their daughter, daughter-in-law and four others were indicted on charges that included mail and wire fraud, money laundering and bribery of foreign officials.

All eight chose to plead guilty rather than face a jury trial. In July, Dixie Randock, a secondary school dropout, was sentenced to three years in prison after the three-year investigation involving thousands of documents and seized computer records.

Most of the sales were carried out by internet spam, court documents said, with Dixie Randock buying up e-mail address lists. On one occasion she included an offer to "buy one degree at full price and get a second degree free".

Roberta Markishtum, jailed for four months, was Dixie Randock's former daughter-in-law, who worked as a printer, providing the diplomas complete with seals and fictitious signatures. Using the same Jennifer Green, she also answered the phone at the operation's "official transcript record centre", verifying

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Statement from the US Department of Justice

the authenticity of degrees for employers who thought they were calling an office in Washington, court documents said.

While the Randocks have been jailed, some of their overseas

associates are beyond the US courts' jurisdiction.

At one point St Regis had "deans of studies" based in Hong Kong and Athens. One-time "dean of studies" for the "St Regis School of Business" was "professor" Steve Ho based in Hong Kong.

Mr Ho also cropped up as "dean of studies" for the bogus "St Regis School of Martial Arts", among other things purporting to teach martial arts by distance learning using "streaming video displays".

Investigators found e-mails between Mr Ho and St Regis defendants confirming that degrees had been sent to Hong Kong. "It is clear from the material unearthed, that Ho was a significant party," Professor Gollin said.

Some overseas associates have run their own businesses, which combine degrees from real institutions with those from bogus ones, including St Regis, further muddying the waters. Some investigators fear that through such combinations the degree mill

operators may have infiltrated genuine bodies, including accrediting organisations.

There is also evidence that degree mills had been able to pay bribes to government officials in order to get accreditation papers.

"St Regis is the first degree mill I have seen where they have got inside the department of education of another government," Mr Ezell said.

The investigation revealed that a high-level Liberian diplomat based in Washington had solicited cash bribes in return for providing Liberian accreditation for St Regis and other diploma mills.

Mr Ezell said the operation was "very good at surgery".

A photo showing one St Regis campus was actually a picture of Blenheim Palace in England, birthplace of Winston Churchill.

"The faculty portraits showed that heads of Africans had been grafted on to the body of white men, they were black faces with white necks."

In July 2005, US agents staged a sting in a meeting with St Regis officials, posing as investors looking to purchase accreditation for universities.

The agents secretly taped Abdullah Dunbar, who was the Liberian embassy's deputy chief of mission, demanding US\$5,000 and a paid trip to Liberia to finalise accreditation for the fictitious university. A month later the authorities raided offices in Arizona, Idaho and Washington state, confiscating computers and degree-printing equipment.

The main perpetrators have been brought to justice, but Professor Gollin said he believed unscrupulous former overseas associates of the degree mill could well be using similar methods to continue selling bogus degrees worldwide from non-US bases.

Forgers flourish in Asia as west cracks down

Counterfeit-degree operators have been increasingly moving to Asia to escape a crackdown in the west.

At the same time, the huge rise in Chinese and other Asian students studying overseas has made it easier to pass off fake British and US degrees as genuine at home, or present bogus mainland degrees in order to get into postgraduate programmes abroad.

Fake degrees can still be bought on Bangkok's Khao San Road, despite a recent government crackdown.

Britain's National Recognition Information Centre, which tracks bogus degrees for universities and many large companies recruiting worldwide, said almost a third of foreign teachers in Thailand had fake qualifications.

However, Thai authorities had been checking up on English-language teachers in recent months to root out "bought" qualifications.

This does not appear to have stopped the forgers. With a rocketing demand for English teachers in Taiwan, an estimated 40 per cent of teachers there are also thought to have fake diplomas, often bought in Thailand.

Beijing and Shenzhen have been big centres of the bogus degree-certificate industry, reproducing degrees from Britain, Australia, Canada and India. But determined moves by mainland authorities to shut them down have driven them underground – many have cropped up in Zhuhai.

"Shenzhen is not a haven any more because of the determination of the authorities. So it is all over the place now. In mainland China, every little city has its own operation, some with small industrial units," said Ning Guan, head of data and research at Naric UK. "There are often three-man operations with all the seals and papers, and the

tools in a handbag or a suitcase, and they move around," he said.

"Counterfeit certificates are a very serious problem in China. There is a particular problem with bogus British degrees because people believe the Chinese [authorities] won't be able to search in England."

Many counterfeiters based in Britain and the US are run by Chinese with links to mainland counterfeiters, Mr Ning said.

"They sell to Chinese students in Britain or America who have not managed to complete their degrees."

Some degree counterfeiters attract a worldwide clientele. Best known is Shenzhen's Back Alley Press, which describes itself as a retailer of "fake diplomas and novelty transcripts".

Previously sent from Shenzhen and from Thailand, "certificates" are now sent from the Philippines, "due to a change in the political climate", according to Back Alley's website.

It warns against fake diplomas produced in the US or Canada which, "once made a reasonable product ... but have now been shut down".

Back Alley claims it sent out 1,500 documents last year. Charging upwards of US\$235 for a bachelor's degree and more for a higher degree, it is a lucrative business.

It also provides a "replacement degree service" and transcripts with whatever grades the client desires.

A recent scan of all diplomas held by universities and academics in Japan and South Korea unearthed a large number of fake documents. Fake degree certificates held by members of the South Korean military, for example, were produced in the Philippines.

Yojana Sharma

Q&A

My daughter plays two musical instruments and is very proficient at reading music, yet her primary school music lessons seem to be quite basic. I don't think she is being challenged or taken to the next level. Why don't schools stream for music as they do with other subjects in order to allow the good musicians to flourish rather than "dumbing" down the lessons for the other children?

Teacher Julie McGuire replies:

Music is so much more than learning to play an instrument or becoming an

expert in music theory. There are many aspects that are an integral part of the music curriculum which are open and accessible to all abilities and can be enjoyed at any level.

One important example is developing a love and appreciation of music in all its diverse forms. This can include an appreciation of the many different styles played by people around the world.

Other significant areas include learning a good singing technique using the voice, aural training to be able to distinguish rhythm and pitch, composing using different media including computers, experimenting with a variety

of instruments such as percussion and giving opportunities for pupils to express themselves creatively.

Music is not just about the development of individual skills, but about making music as part of a larger group and learning to play together.

Good teachers group students in a variety of ways, which often duplicates what happens in the world outside school and promotes enjoyment. Effective group work is very beneficial, not only in a musical sense but also to a child's social and emotional development.

Streaming tends to be a contentious issue and there are differing views.

You will find that some primary schools do not stream for any areas of the curriculum, whereas others stream for certain subjects where they deem it advantageous for the pupils' learning and they have the necessary human resources. It is unusual for primary schools in particular to do this for music.

In an ideal world we would all have smaller classes and more specialist teachers, but most school budgets do not allow for this.

Conscientious and competent music teachers will cater for all levels of ability in music lessons, differentiating in the same way as any other subject.

Those parents who want their child to learn an instrument to a high level have the option of paying for a peripatetic teacher. These teachers often work in schools, typically at the end of the time-tabled day.

Although your daughter's class lessons may not hone or develop advanced instrumental and theory skills, there are opportunities in most schools to do this.

Able and keen musicians such as your daughter can join extra-curricular programmes, including the school orchestra, recorder groups or choir. School productions and drama

performances often require able musicians as well.

If your daughter is actually complaining about being bored in music lessons this is a different issue, and you may choose to follow it up by talking to her teacher directly.

You could also talk to the individual-needs teacher about the possibility of your daughter being placed on the gifted and talented list. This may open further opportunities for her.

When your daughter is older, she may choose music as one of her exam options at secondary school and will therefore be challenged in the areas mention. She will

also be likely to work with students of a similar ability.

For now, encourage her to enjoy her music lessons in whatever form they take – you do not say she does not – and the creativity they offer, and be positive about the gains she can make from the chance to work with her peers.

Do you have a question?
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