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CHECKING FACTS
BUILDING TRUST

Are UK employers really affected by bogus “life experience” qualifications?

Verifile, the UK based pre-employment screening specialists, regularly finds “life experience” qualifications popping up in its background checks. Bogus “life experience” degrees are sold by Degree Mills, mainly online entities that purport to be genuine universities, offering qualifications based on little or no work. Their lack of recognised accreditation or legal authorisation to grant degrees means there is no guarantee of quality. Therefore, those who rely on these “degrees”, such as prospective employers and the public at large, are put at risk. Two recent cases uncovered by Verifile, which highlight the need for thorough screening for degree mills as part of good practice CV checking, are examined in this case study.

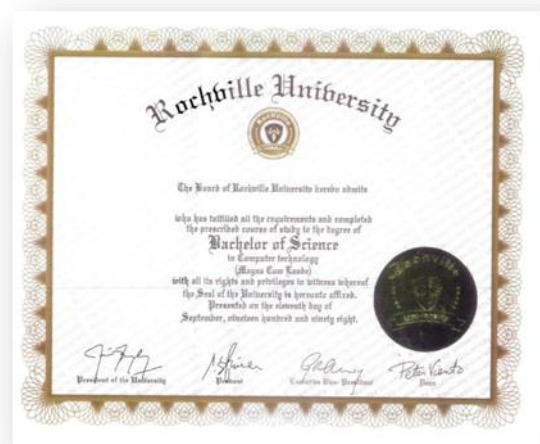
A financial institution recently received an application from a candidate for a management position who turned out to have a “degree” from the notorious *Rochville University*. This position entails the management of sensitive functions at this financial services firm in relation to their product line; ensuring all controls and procedures are in place for the teams. The discovery of a bogus degree on this candidate’s CV was cause for concern for our client.

Trust, integrity and honesty are all vital characteristics for this role. Once it was apparent the candidate had claimed on his CV to have a bogus degree, our client questioned whether the candidate had the character required for the role.

On first completing the application, this candidate claimed to have a degree from *New Rochelle University* in New York. This might have been the reputable and legitimate *College of New Rochelle*. However, the candidate called into the Verifile office to change the story – it was not *New Rochelle University* but in fact *Rochelle University* that they now claimed to have a degree from.

Running *Rochelle University* through *Accredibase™*, the global database of unrecognised education providers developed by Verifile, revealed that it had been blacklisted by three US states – Oregon, Maine and Texas.

Rochelle University is not accredited by an agency recognised by either the United States Department of Education or the Council of Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA). Verifile’s researchers were unable to find any information regarding the location of *Rochelle University*, apart from the US telephone number provided by the candidate. It is unheard of for a reputable university to hide its location.



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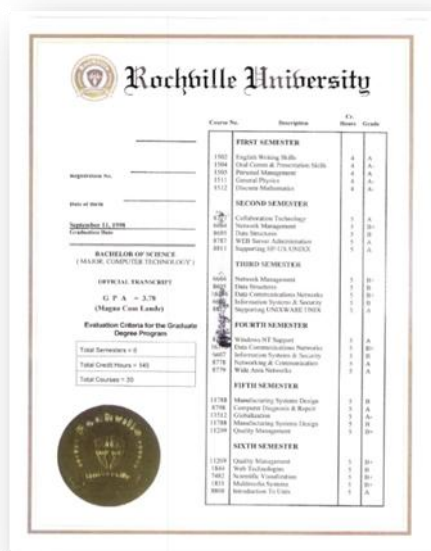


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Information from Oregon’s Office of Degree Authorization suggested a link between *Rochelle University* and the widely written about - and still active - diploma mill *Rochville University*. Accredibase™ researchers decided to test this – they called up *Rochville University* and asked for the phone number for degree verifications. Lo and behold it was the same number that the candidate had provided for *Rochelle University*.

Wanting to get as full a picture of the situation as possible, Verifile also asked the candidate to provide a degree certificate. Not surprisingly, the documents provided by the candidate showed that they did, after all, purchase their degree from the notorious *Rochville University*...



There are numerous stories relating to *Rochville University* “degrees” in the press – *The Guardian* reported the case of a man who posed as a forensic scientist, receiving at least £250,000 for acting as an expert witness in UK courts for 27 years. All three of Mr. Morrison’s “degrees” – a BSc in Forensic Science, a Master’s in Forensic Investigation and a Doctorate in Criminology - were from the fictitious *Rochville University*, according to the BBC. As a result, Police had to reassess approximately 700 cases involving Mr. Morrison, searching for miscarriages of justice.

Another dubious degree popped up in the background checks of another of Verifile’s City financial clients recently. The candidate in this case, applying for a job in the IT department of a London based mortgage company, claimed to have a BSc in Computer Science – this time from *University of Northwest*. The candidate claimed he studied for his “degree” through a local agent in the UK, *Stratford College London*.



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Verifile's researchers routinely ran both *University of Northwest* and *Stratford College London* through Accredibase™ and alarm bells started ringing when a match was returned.

University of Northwest published a New York address on the transcript provided by this candidate. The "university" is not and has never been accredited by a US recognised accrediting agency.

University of Northwest is also not listed as a recognised New York University or College by New York State Education Department (NYSED). According to NYSED's website, to establish a college or university in New York State and to confer degrees, an entity must be authorised by the Board of Regents or its charter. In addition, use of the terms "college" and "university" is generally restricted to institutions chartered by the Regents or the State Legislature.

What's more, *University of Northwest* has also been blacklisted in four US States – Texas, Oregon, Michigan and Maine. According to Oregon's Office of Degree Authorization, *University of Northwest* has been actively selling invalid degrees in Afghanistan this summer.

Neither the *University of Northwest* nor *Stratford College London* is a UK recognised institution with the legal power to award their own UK recognised degrees. Stratford College London is, however, currently licensed under Tier 4 by the UK Border Agency to sponsor overseas students.

When Verifile's researcher contacted *Stratford College London*, they were able to verify that the *University of Northwest* degree was attained through their college; however, they also stated that they no longer offer *University of Northwest* courses.

University of Northwest also claims to be accredited by several agencies that have been blacklisted as unrecognised in the United States. Degree mills will often use – or even invent their own – bogus accrediting agencies, known as accreditation mills, in an attempt to make their qualifications look genuine. Accreditation mills tend to choose names similar to those of recognised accrediting agencies and will even falsely add well respected universities to the list of institutions they "accredit".

This particular candidate had also lied about his A Level grades on his CV which made Verifile's report regarding his bogus education even harder to ignore.

It is hard to believe that either of these candidates was not aware of what they were doing when they originally purchased these "degrees". Those of us who have been to university know just how tough it is to get a degree and the amount of work that is required. We would expect that anyone claiming to have a degree has gone through the same demanding process and that their degree is recognised in the country in which it was awarded. Regardless of whether or not having a degree is essential for the job itself, it is an issue of honesty, integrity and trust. If someone has knowingly set out to deceive in this way, they may not stop there and the potential risk to unsuspecting employers is huge.

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Employers should also consider the bad publicity involved if these cases come into the public light, or the consequences of failing an audit from a regulator. Take the recent court case involving BSKyB and EDS. The Times reported that Joe Galloway, a senior EDS manager and key witness in the case, lied in court about the origins of an MBA degree. He was exposed when BSKyB's barrister purchased the same degree on the internet from *Concordia College and University* for his dog, Lulu. As a result, the judge ruled that EDS should pay over £700 million to BSKyB. Often it is the case that when conducting a background check, high importance is given to protecting against applicants who present fake certificates. Checking if a certificate has been faked is fairly simple and is done by contacting the institution who has supposedly issued it. Therefore, if a job applicant is claiming to have a degree from a well known university (eg. Harvard), it is good practice to contact the Registry department and ask if they have issued the qualification to the candidate.

However, this approach does not help when trying to spot and protect against degree mill qualifications. The examples discussed in this report highlight the importance of understanding how education systems around the world work when conducting a thorough CV verification. Armed with this knowledge, the background screening agency would be able to check the recognition status of the university and confirm if they are genuine or fake – and whether a degree from the university should be taken seriously.

About Accredibase

Accredibase is the first resource of its kind designed to help professionals involved in education verification weed out qualifications from bogus universities, colleges and high schools. It offers constantly updated information, built using data gathered from law enforcement agencies and independent research. Accredibase currently has 4788 institutions in its database. Of those, 2449 have been positively identified as mills, 2339 are currently being investigated and suspicious new institutions are being added daily.

www.accredibase.com

About Verifile Limited

Verifile is Europe's leading background screening company. Its comprehensive range of services allows employers to verify employment, qualifications, identity, criminal records and credit histories globally. This is offered through innovative solutions which are quick, easy to use and affordable. Its services are used by clients around the world, in a wide variety of sectors, with over 30% of checks conducted outside the UK.

www.verifile.co.uk

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