



A DEGREE OF ILLEGITIMACY



BOGUS ONLINE UNIVERSITIES WITH THEIR SLEEK WEBSITES, BOMBASTIC ACCREDITATION CLAIMS AND CLEVER SALES PATTERN REMAIN A GROWING MENACE FOR STUDENTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST. BUT IT IS THE VERY SAME INTERNET THAT GIVES YOU THE TOOLS TO BEAT THEM AT THEIR GAME

BY PAIGE AARHUS



Scanning the website of the Middle East Office of Academic Regulation and Examination (MEOARE), I click on "Live Chat Now", and a pop-up box appears. I am asked for my name, phone number and e-mail, and then I am chatting with an operator, Natasha Troxler. I tell her I am inquiring about an online degree.

She gives me two options: Prior Learning Assessment, in which anything from work experience to volunteer hours count as academic credit, and an online degree – in my case, a Master's degree – which will be granted by Northgrove University, an American institution that has recently, a press release informs, received a \$5 million (Dh18.35m) grant for Ebola research.

In the case of a Prior Learning Assessment degree, Natasha explains that "you are not studying or taking any exams. You will go through the process of formal assessment interview and verification to demonstrate your knowledge being equivalent to the academic requirement based on your work experience."

Natasha asks me for more personal



Dean Hoke, co-founder of Abu Dhabi-based education consultancy Edu-Alliance

details, including my job title and monthly salary, and asks me why I should qualify for a scholarship at Northgrove. I wasn't aware I was eligible. She tells me that, based on my work experience (I told her I am unemployed), I qualify for 100 per cent scholarship. My degree will only cost \$500 in registration fees. All she needs now is my credit card number, and I can earn a Master's degree in two years, or less, if I'd like. She still hasn't asked me what I would like to study.



Benjamin Plackett, a journalist with Al Fanar Media, has uncovered a number of scam universities

I found the MEOARE website in a press release announcing that the office had partnered with the Gulf Ministry of Higher Education to create "new higher education opportunities" across the Gulf Co-operation Council nations.

The problem is that MEOARE doesn't exist – a simple Google image search on a photo of its "chairman", Mubin Fatih Suleiman, reveals that it's a stock photo from the website Shutterstock. The Gulf Ministry of Higher Education doesn't

Massive open online courses

Thinking of studying online, but not willing to make a huge financial investment? Massive open online courses (MOOCs) are definitely your best option. Covering literally thousands of different subjects and offered for free by top institutions including Harvard, Princeton and Yale, these courses don't usually grant formal qualifications, but they will get you in a post-secondary state of mind, offering extremely valuable learning opportunities. The best part? They're usually free. Some of our favourite MOOC providers include:

1. Coursera (www.coursera.org): Offers courses from Ivy League universities free of charge. Coursera has offered over 660 courses, with 85 active at any given time. Recent offerings include 'The Data Scientist's Toolbox', offered by Johns Hopkins; 'Data Analysis and Statistical Inference', offered by Duke University; 'Foundations of Business Strategy', offered by the University of Virginia; and 'Understanding the Brain: The Neurobiology of Everyday Life', offered by the University of Chicago.

2. Edx (www.edx.org): Founded by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard University in May 2012, EdX currently offers courses from over 60 non-profits, schools,

corporations, and international organisations, with more than 3 million users taking more than 300 courses online through the platform as of October 2014.

3. Udacity (www.udacity.com): This is a for-profit educational organisation founded by Stanford University in 2011. Originally focussed on university-style courses, today the site offers vocational training for professionals, in areas such as front end web development, data analytics, iOS development, and programming.



PROTECT YOURSELF

Tips to avoid getting scammed, from Dean Hoke, co-founder of Abu Dhabi's Edu-Alliance

* Just because a university is recommended by the CAA for online learning, doesn't mean the school actually offers the programme you want – the London School of Economics, for example, is on the CAA's list of approved foreign online universities, but the school doesn't offer any distance learning programmes at the graduate level. Any agency claiming they do is lying to you.

* If you end up discussing enrolment with an online university, ask who officially accredits their degrees: "It should be the Commission for Academic Accreditation, or if it's in the US, ask who the regional accreditation agency is."

* Run a simple background check: "The CAA posts lists of accredited institutions online."

* Don't get caught up in the emotion: "Good sales people will play on that weakness. When you're thinking about going back to university or higher education, you need a plan or a process for what you want to do, so avoid acting impulsively."

* Don't be fooled by a sophisticated website.

* Follow the oldest rule in the world: "If it looks too good to be true, it is."

* Ensure that any online course you take involves a real person at the other end: "Legitimate online courses should be interactive, meaning you receive feedback and personal attention from your instructor, not just grades."

* For career training, ensure your employer will accept the accreditation: "If you go all the way through with an online programme, get a certificate, and want to get it attested by the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research or an employer, and they don't recognise it, they'll say, 'I'm sorry, it's worthless, no promotion, you just spent money on absolutely nothing.' At a minimum, find out if you go to this place, will your employer accept it?"

exist either. I suspect Natasha Troxler, Northgrove University and the \$5 million Ebola grant are also fiction. Indeed, the university website is remarkably similar to MEOARE, right down to the Live Chat option for prospective students. All you need to enroll in Northgrove, says its website, is a credit card number. It's easier than online shopping.

Smart scams

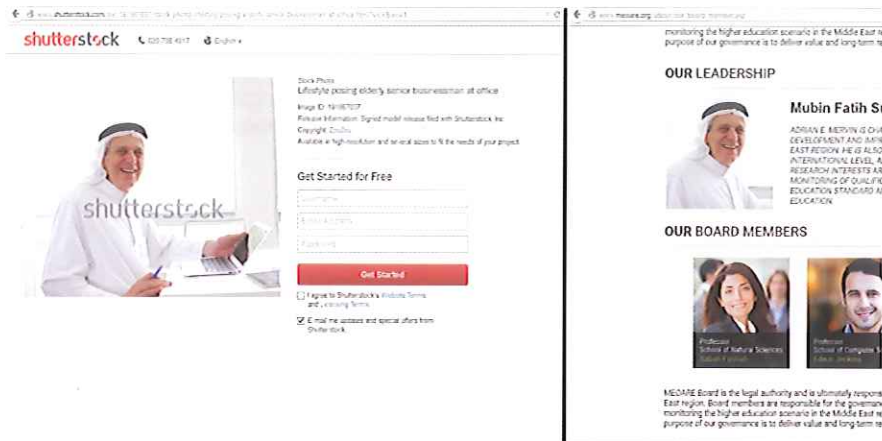
Dean Hoke, co-founder of the Abu Dhabi-based consultancy Edu-Alliance and a resident of the UAE for the past six years, says that sophisticated scams like MEOARE are becoming increasingly common here. Hoke was the one who sent me the original press release, after his own suspicions



led to investigations in a major Abu Dhabi newspaper and the education publication Al Fanar Media earlier this year.

"It was a little bit suspicious," he said.

"MEOARE said that they had a lot of partnerships, and I was reading this going, 'Okay, they were saying they're representatives of the Gulf Ministry of



A photo of the chairman of the Middle East Office for Academic Regulation is revealed to be a stock photo from website Shutterstock

Higher Education', which I'd never heard of, but at the same time it was somewhat plausible. A regional accreditation group has been talked about, so I thought maybe they had actually formed one. But then I started clicking through the site, and that's when it really started taking off."

Hoke's quest to shed light on scam universities first began on social media. While browsing sites including Facebook and LinkedIn, he noticed that a number of online universities were using photos of Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice-President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai, to advertise their courses. "It was absurd. I looked at these ads and I was saying to myself, 'The sheikhs don't do that sort of thing, they don't tend to appear in advertisements.' I kept on investigating, and I started seeing them use different faces and different sorts of tactics to make themselves look legitimate, but the degrees were very cheap and you didn't have to work very hard to get them," he said.

After speaking with the same Live Chat window I would later talk to, Hoke realised that high-pressure sales people like "Natasha" were conning would-be students out of thousands of dollars.

In addition to Western markets, scammers are increasingly targeting the Middle East, where there are few consumer protection mechanisms like the Better Business Bureau, based in North America. For example, another scam institution that Hoke exposed was MUST University,

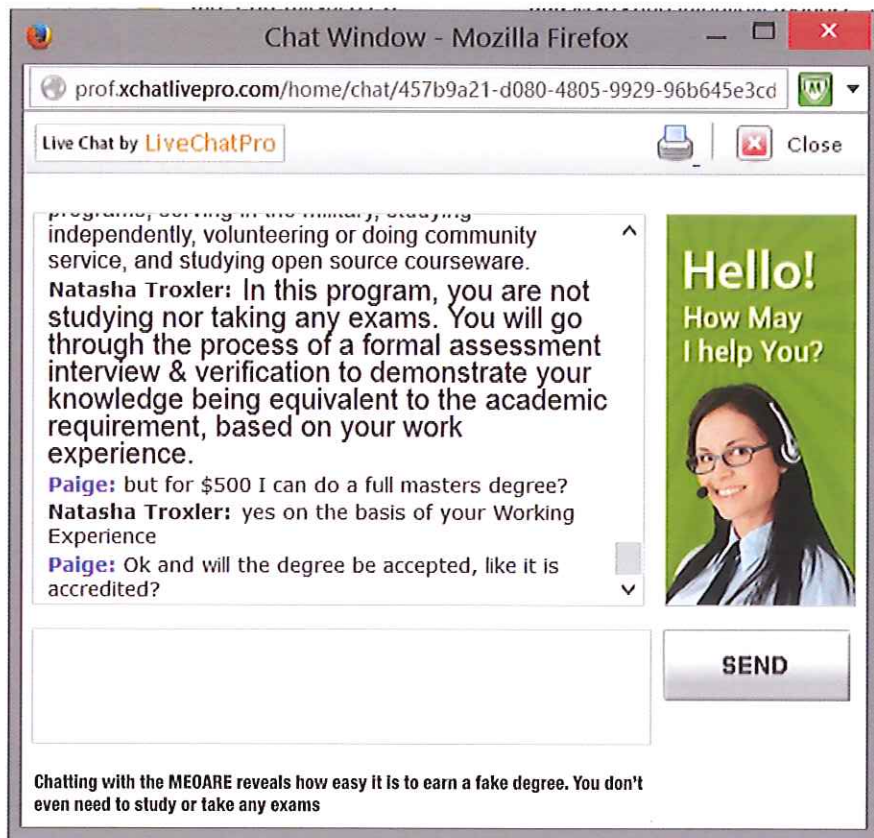
which lists itself as the "world's largest university", and yet seems to be run by the same people responsible for the MEOARE website. A LinkedIn search of MUST University affiliates lists 1,062 people, of which 101 live in the UAE, 273 in Egypt and 177 in Saudi Arabia.

Benjamin Plackett, a journalist at Al Fanar Media who launched an extensive investigation into diploma mills in early

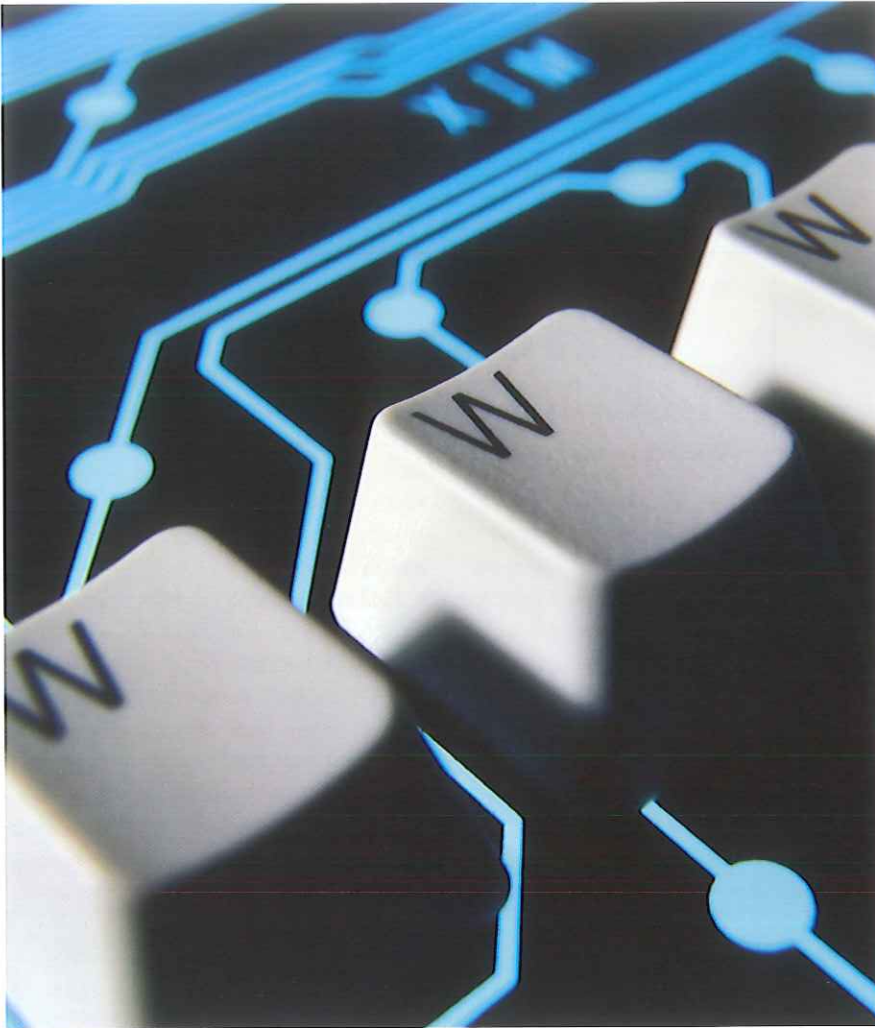
2015, said of the scams targeting the Middle East: "At first, I thought it was maybe because young people in the Middle East were less digitally-literate and could be more easily persuaded than a Westerner who is very familiar with things like the Nigerian Prince scam. But after further research, I found so many Americans were also taken in by this. It's so easy to believe someone when you want it to be true." What made the scams successful was that "a lot of people want a degree without paying full price, especially in the Middle East, where if you have a middle-income family, they might not have the same funds available for the second son or the daughter for post-secondary education".

Alarm bells

In the UAE, the issue has come to the forefront at the Commission for Academic Accreditation (CAA) and the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research in recent years. During an education forum hosted in Dubai, CAA Director Dr Badr Aboul-Ela warned that scam universities were proliferating globally and targeting



Chatting with the MEOARE reveals how easy it is to earn a fake degree. You don't even need to study or take any exams



local students. He called upon prospective students and their parents to be vigilant, explaining that negative perceptions of e-learning stemmed from “the bad example of sub-standard online programmes and the rise of diploma mills”.

The CAA has been aware of universities like MUST and Northgrove for some time, and in 2012, Dr. Aboul-Ela told The National that a number of MUST graduates had been shocked to find that their degrees were all but worthless.

“We tell them they should have consulted us first. For any Emirati to get their online degree attested, they have to get a no-objection from us before they commence. It’s for their own protection.”

It’s also for the public good—as Plackett points out, some of these scams could prove to be dangerous.

“What was the most concerning to me about this story is that some of these universities offer programmes for medical degrees and nursing, which could seriously jeopardise patient care,” he says.

In an effort to better inform prospective students, the CAA lists accredited universities on its website. At present, only one local online university, Hamdan Bin Mohammed Smart University, is officially accredited, while 105 foreign online universities have been recommended by

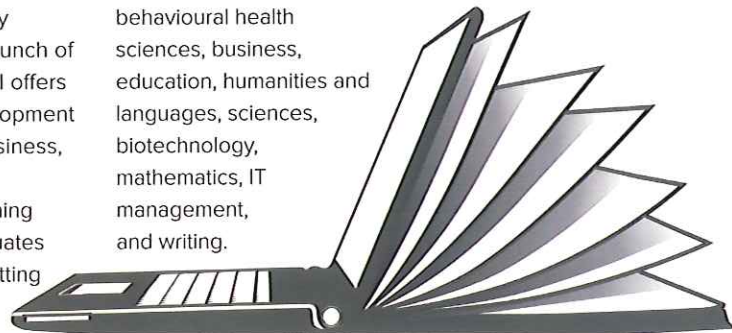
Accredited online courses available to students in the UAE

1. Hamdan bin Mohammed Smart University: Established in 2002, this UAE-based institute has been engaged in pioneering educational projects including the Middle East e-Learning Quality Framework (MeLQ), the Middle East e-Learning Association (MEEA), the Middle East Quality Association (MEQA), and the e-Health Scientific Society (eHSS). These initiatives culminated in 2013 with the launch of the HBMSU Social Online Learning project. The school offers undergraduate, post-graduate, and professional development programmes across a host of disciplines, including business, health, and education.

2. Harvard University: Offering over 100 distance-learning options, this world-leading university allows undergraduates and graduates to pursue degrees entirely online, permitting credits to be applied towards an extended degree.

3. Johns Hopkins University offers online courses through the Krieger School of Arts and Sciences, as well as the Whiting School of Engineering.

4. University of California, Berkeley, offers online courses across a host of specialisations, including art and design, behavioural health sciences, business, education, humanities and languages, sciences, biotechnology, mathematics, IT management, and writing.



the CAA. Unsurprisingly, Northgrove, MUST and other scam institutions, such as Hurst University, Asherton University, Delaward University, Rellington University and Presley University, are not on the list.

Unfortunately, it's almost impossible to take action against fake universities—although many claim to be based in the US, investigations have shown that operators are writing from countries including Pakistan and China, while US authorities have been unable to investigate schools, as none have a physical location.

“An Arabic Better Business Bureau would definitely be a good thing, but I don't think that it would result in shutting these people down. It would give someone who'd been duped the opportunity to complain, but very few people who complained managed to get any of their money back. I would say that for these people to get taken down there needs to be other agencies involved, government agencies, but at the same time, the crime is not serious enough to warrant an FBI or Interpol investigation,” says Plackett.

As such, the onus is on the student to protect themselves.

Degree aspirants should avoid falling for the fake legitimacy projected by sleek websites. Since the website is a student's primary interface with an institution, people put a lot of value on how it looks and what it says. Ravi, a Dubai resident, had this experience. He was conned by a school



called 'Bakerville University', sometime after he dismissed an intimation from 'Nixon University'. He placed his faith in Bakerville as the site looked legit, he was told he would get a scholarship and he wouldn't need to pay until he received the degree. This correspondent checked out the Bakerville website – it did look thoroughly professional, with the link of a news item on CNN iReport. That link indeed took one to a page with a logo identical to CNN iReport, and there was a news item with the heading, 'Bakerville University Restructures its Processes to Make Online Education Even More Affordable'. It all looked wonderfully real, until one put a search for

'Bakerville University' on the CNN website, and there were no results.

In fact, 'no results' was the least of Ravi's worries once he stepped into the snare. "After registration, I received a phone call from the US. A woman with an Asian accent took me through the whole process. They asked me to send them my CV and a passport copy to apply for the Masters of Business Management programme for \$3,500. I was then told I was shortlisted for a scholarship and would only be paying \$450." Ravi did get his certificate, but his trouble began when it was time to pay for the 'degree' and get it attested for an extra fee. Something in the payment process struck him as "fishy", so he did some research – better late than never – and found that the university did not have any trustworthy accreditation.

Backing out, Ravi told the Bakerville staff that he did not want to pay. Then he began getting the threats. "[The staffer] kept on calling and asking me why was I worried and [that] she would get me a UAE and US verification. When I refused, she said I should have thought about it before and that they knew how to get my money and I wouldn't like it." He was also threatened with blacklisting for "any global education" if he didn't pay up. Once bitten, Ravi now has this advice for online degree hunters, "Do as much research as possible; make sure the website is accredited and valid."



Prison and fine up to Dh500,000 for degree scammers in UAE: Al Ameri

ABU DHABI POLICE OFFICER SAYS GHQ IS AWARE AND GEARED TO CONFRONT SUCH CRIMES

BY MAHA ISMAIL



Captain Salem Hamad Al Sharqi Al Ameri

UAE citizens and residents should beware of fake websites that offer degrees purporting to be from respected universities within the country and without, a senior police official said.

The Criminal Investigation Department at Abu Dhabi Police GHQ is aware of this trend and takes preventive and punitive steps against those who operate such scams, Captain Salem Hamad Al Sharqi Al Ameri, Director of E-Crimes Branch, Organised Crime Section, Criminal Investigation Department at Abu Dhabi Police GHQ, told 999 in an interview. Excerpts:

Has the UAE in general and Abu Dhabi in particular witnessed the emergence of fake university websites?

Yes, we have received a number of



Approach the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research to authenticate such websites, and report your suspicions to the authorities

reports and complaints in this regard. People inform us how they have received emails and social media messages from such scamsters. These websites are operated from outside the country, so we block access to them.

What should a person do if they have been scammed or have received an approach from such a website?

They can contact the E-Crimes Branch in the Organised Crime Section of the Abu Dhabi Police GHQ's Criminal Investigation Department with the relevant proofs.

What are the laws and punishments relevant to such crimes?

Article 9 of Law No (5) for 2012 prescribes the following: Anyone who uses an IP address in an illegal way, through operating a fake website, or a website which belongs to a third party, or by any other way, with an intention to commit a crime or to cover up a crime, shall be imprisoned and fined not less than 250,000 dirhams and not more than 500,000 dirhams, or one of these two punishments.

What are measures taken to close the fake universities' websites?

We approach the UAE Telecommunications Regulatory Authority to block the fake websites if they are

outside the country. If it is proved that they are inside the country, legal action will be taken.

If those who are involved in such crimes live outside the country, do you coordinate with Interpol to bring them to justice?

We approach the Public Prosecution to obtain an international arrest warrant, and contact Interpol to activate it.

What are you doing to spread awareness about this issue?

We co-ordinate with the Security Media department at the General Secretariat of the Office of HH Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Interior to monitor the emergence of such activity as well as spread awareness through diverse media channels and social media websites. The CID at Abu Dhabi Police GHQ holds workshops on this issue for local authorities.

What advice would you give the public?

Verify these websites and universities, contact the cultural offices of the embassies in the UAE, approach the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research to authenticate such websites, and report your suspicions or experience with these scammers to the competent authorities.



DON'T BECOME GRIST FOR THE DEGREE MILL

Dr Theodore Karasik is a Gulf-based Political and Social Analyst at Gulf States Analytics

Knowingly buying a fake degree or being conned into getting one can be a huge setback for your career, not the advantage you're looking for

Imagine a world where doctorates are earned in a fortnight, for under Dh800. Sounds too good to be true? That's because it is. In a highly competitive, high-income, migrant labour market such as the UAE, where one's earning potential increases with advanced credentials, folks are trying to get ahead literally by cheating.

Let's face it – in the UAE, there's a tendency to always boost one's credentials in order to give an air of authority. Many claim to be doctors of philosophy or professors when they clearly are not. Others claim to be doctors of medicine, which is even more dangerous for potential victims. There's a growing tendency to deceive colleagues, business partners, employers and clients. These individuals seek quick fixes by getting fake degrees.

Increasingly, one receives e-mails and mobile calls, reads on the Internet, or hears through a colleague or a friend about new universities offering degrees that sound heavyweight. Many such institutions are criminal enterprises; there are enough gullible individuals out there to keep them in business.

A person may get a degree knowing it's fake, or a person may be conned into getting a fake degree – in either case, the degree is illegal and it has no value once an employer does a little background check.

Many people receive information about what are called 'conversion degrees' through a larger scam called a 'degree mill', where an 'expert panel' analyses one's years of work experience, creating a university degree commensurate with employment history. There are no classes or examinations offered by these fake online universities. These scams prey on consumers' ignorance about terms like 'accreditation' and 'licensing'. Mentioning such degrees in resumé can result in legal issues. In reality, there are no shortcuts in education.

Many of these fake online universities claim to be supported by US- or UK-based educational institutions. By using fake

logos and phony names, they look legitimate to the untrained eye. But real colleges and universities will never advertise through website popups and telemarketing.

In the UAE, there are education zones where universities operate. If a university is based outside any of these physical areas, such as Dubai Knowledge Village or Dubai International Academic City, they are not legitimate. That's an important point to remember.

To combat this scourge, the UAE government has established laws requiring attestation of university degrees, and the UAE Ministry of Higher Education has developed a web portal to inform would-be students about legitimate institutions. In Dubai, the Knowledge and Human Development Authority investigates

each false website to remove their claims. All breaches of copyright, trademark violation or falsification of facts are reported to the UAE authorities for corrective actions.

At a personal level, candidates need to verify all aspects of any university degree programme. They need to check out relevant websites, call the university

to see if they actually have a programme and, most important of all, look at the faculty members and cross-check their background. Where do they do their university work? Are they published? All of this effort may take time, but it's better than walking into a trap.

The real danger is when fake degree holders are in decision-making positions. If employed with the government sector, such individuals slow down the national development. In the UAE, there are large numbers of people with fake certificates working in both the public and the private sectors. Thankfully, the UAE government is strict in its attestation process in order to put a stop to bogus university degrees. Reporting such scams to the authorities is imperative to save time, money, embarrassment and legal ramifications.

At a personal level, candidates need to verify all aspects of any degree programme