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**Academic qualification acceptability and
authenticity: a comparative risk assessment of
approaches employed by the recruitment and higher
education sectors of Australia**

Volume 1 of 2

By

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N.B. Because of the pioneering nature of this research, Appendices 1-32 have been included to give readers examples of how non-official and fraudulent providers of academic qualifications operate in the current global context.

Abstract

At a time when academic qualifications are in great demand worldwide, the risk posed by non-official and falsified academic providers has increased considerably. Human capital theorists argue that acquiring degrees is an individual's investment for greater employability. Credentialist thought contends that qualifications are merely convenient screening tools. Although academic qualifications are recognised as poor proxy measures of ability, employers, human resource recruiters and higher education providers still mandate these for entry into their respective sectors. One result of this demand has been the emergence of a confusing marketplace of online provision which has created opportunities for non-official and fraudulent providers to operate alongside official institutions. The resulting risk levels appear unnecessarily high because of poor verification of qualification acceptability and authenticity. To assess the risk posed by this quandary, a comprehensive typology of academic credential providers is developed and all available verification tools and resources used to mitigate this risk are reviewed.

To investigate the extent of this problem in Australia, the study used two approaches under the theoretical framework of risk management. Firstly, the author assessed the potential risk of Australian academic qualifications being falsified and available on the Internet, through an exploratory research question. An anonymous email account was used to solicit the purchasing of an Australian academic qualification. Secondly, equivalency testing was used to assess how far existing verification tools were being employed by three separate but equally important users of academic qualifications in Australia; the Recruitment and Consulting Services Association, official Private and Public Providers of postgraduate academic qualifications. A Delphi Panel was used to provide a semi-quantitative risk level

for the key verification tools. Their measures were then applied to each population to generate a risk profile.

The findings from the exploratory research question found 46 falsified providers operating on the internet during the period of this study. Up to 54.4% offered to sell the author a counterfeit Australian academic qualification. These findings suggest that Australian higher education qualifications are subject to substantial risk of falsification. For the main research questions, an equivalent low level of moderate risk resource use was found; conversely an equivalent high use of high risk items was found amongst the three populations. As an overall risk position, public providers of post-graduate higher education placed themselves in the lowest risk position for determining both the acceptability and authenticity of academic qualifications. With regard to determining acceptability, private providers of postgraduate qualifications were less prone to risk than members of the RCSA, whereas when it came to determining authenticity, RCSA members employed better risk minimisation strategies than private providers of postgraduate qualifications.

While the semi-quantitative risk levels should be interpreted with caution, this study is the first of its type to address the problem from an Australian perspective. The study's findings point to the need for a systematic and comprehensive approach to the verification of academic qualifications, and an online risk treatment tool is proposed as a means of achieving this. Further research in the area of screening practices and quantification of non-official providers of higher education is recommended.