

## International educators discuss problem of fraud

Submitted by Elizabeth Redden on September 14, 2012 - 3:00am

DUBLIN, Ireland -- Fraud in international higher education is a \$1.5 billion to \$2.5 billion business, an expert said Thursday here at the European Association for International Education annual conference.

Daniel J. Guhr, managing director for Illuminate Consulting Group, which advises governments, universities and foundations on higher education strategy, stressed that the estimate is necessarily imprecise: "Really good fraud is not visible." But he said that the consulting group's research does show that fraud is a pervasive problem.

"It's everywhere," Guhr said, "and it hits all aspects of international education, from admissions to immigration rules violations." At the extreme are cases like Tri-Valley University, an unaccredited California institution and alleged "visa mill" shut down by U.S. authorities in 2011. Less nefariously, there is reason to believe that at many U.S. colleges, good old-fashioned evaluation of international applicants' credentials is [getting short shrift](#) <sup>[1]</sup>.

During Thursday's session, Guhr provided an overview of the problem of fraud in international education. He defined fraud broadly, situating various forms of it on a spectrum of severity -- from résumé embellishment, on the low end, to full-scale identity fraud on the high end. In between, Guhr listed fake letters of recommendation ("We tell all our clients to forget letters of reference -- they're completely useless"), plagiarism, purchased test scores ("I'm very, very worried about the validity of English language test scores coming out of certain Asian countries," Guhr said, later citing China and Vietnam in particular), purchased transcripts, purchased degrees, fake immigration records (such as passports), and bribery of immigration officials.

Guhr said that the key driver of fraud is economic benefit -- not only to the offending student and family, but to other stakeholders as well, colleges included. Increasingly, college leaders view international students as an important source of tuition revenue. The more, the merrier.

Of course, Guhr said that legitimate institutions don't seek to admit students who defraud them, but they can abet fraud, wittingly or not. He shared one anecdote from a discussion board of international educators: in Guhr's telling, someone from a Midwestern college posted in the spring that the institution had received 80 applications from Nigerian students, all with the same letter of reference.

Someone from another college posted that it also had a big batch of applications from Nigeria, all with identical transcripts. Then a third person posted that the same thing had happened to his institution the year before. And because that institution wanted to diversify its international student population, and thought it would be good to have some Nigerian students, it admitted four of them. The university official signed their I-20s and hasn't seen them since. Ostensibly, the "students" used their visas merely as a means to gain entry into the country.

Guhr said that governments have grown increasingly concerned about fraud in international education. He cited, for example, the decision last month by the U.K. Border Agency to revoke the right of London Metropolitan University to enroll foreign students. [The university is accused of "systemic failures"](#) <sup>[2]</sup> in monitoring the attendance of international students and certifying that they meet English proficiency requirements and hold the proper visas. "This is a classic case of making an example of an offender to send a message to everybody else," Guhr said.

Both Guhr and his fellow panelist, Gudrun Paulsdottir, an international strategist at Sweden's Mälardalen University, emphasized that colleges and governments should see it as being in their own best interests to contain fraud. "What's in the balance is our reputation," said Paulsdottir, who is also the outgoing EAIE president. "We do not want students out there with our degrees who cannot communicate, who cannot spell, who cannot write. That will come back to bite us."

One solution in Sweden was the development of a national application system for international students. Staff members at various universities now work together to evaluate credentials, pooling their resources and knowledge. "At least we are not all of us [separately] assessing the same applications," Paulsdottir said. "We do it in the same way; we have the same basic criteria."

One message of Thursday's session is that colleges should share information on fraud much more freely than they have to date. Guhr said that one barrier to collaboration is the NIMBY problem. "What we get still a lot of in education institutions is, 'Of course fraud is bad, but it's happening everywhere else, not in my institution.'" (For further developments in this realm, [see related article](#). <sup>[3]</sup>)

Rick Torres, president and CEO of the National Student Clearinghouse, attended Thursday's session. During the discussion portion, he shared his own experience with fraud detection when he worked at a credit card company. "These credit card companies, they weren't worried about their banks' reputations; they were worried about catching fraudsters," he said. "Even though they compete very heavily with each other, they actually got together every three months to discuss what was going on, where the fraud was emanating, because it impacted all of them."

### Links:

[1] <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2012/07/26/evaluation-foreign-students-credentials-may-be-getting-short-shrift>

[2] <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2012/09/06/british-higher-education-faces-tension-over-foreign-student-immigration>

[3] <http://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2012/09/14/accrediting-council-creates-group-international-quality-assurance>

[4] <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/focus/international>

[5] <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/news-sections/foreign-students>