AN INTRODUCTION TO QUALIFICATION FRAUD

Most of the people and organisations that deliver exams and assessments act with integrity and professionalism. However, some might be exposed to incentives, and that can increase the risk of fraud or malpractice.

HELPSHEET

Introduction

Each year more than 12m qualification certificates are awarded to learners in England and around the world. Qualification certificates can:
- confirm personal achievement;
- enable access to (or progression within) an occupation or profession;
- provide a 'licence to practise'; or
- allow progression to further study or support mobility.

Regulated qualifications, offered in England, are awarded by more than 160 organisations – including many charities. These awarding organisations range from large household names that award millions of certificates, to very small, niche providers that award certificates to a few people every year.

This market is worth £600m in entry fees alone. This means that the opportunity to make money can sometimes lead to unethical behaviours. The result can be unfair outcomes for students and the loss of public confidence in qualifications, the awarding organisation and in the education sector as a whole.

What is qualification fraud?

Qualification fraud commonly includes theft, fraud and forgery, and may involve trademark and copyright legislation. It falls under a wider umbrella of qualification malpractice.

Awarding organisations must take all reasonable steps to prevent any malpractice or maladministration in the development, delivery and award of qualifications which they make available (or propose to make available).

Types of qualification fraud

Fake certificates

Anyone who falsely creates a qualification certificate or alters a genuine one (by changing the name, subject or grade) and presents it as real is likely to be committing fraud. Intellectual property of the awarding organisations (and regulators) may also be breached if their logos appear.

Fake or altered certificates are sometimes used for immigration fraud (to gain entry to another country) or to confer a 'licence to practise' (ie, construction, security or other licensed role). This potentially puts public safety at risk.

Fake certificates can be hard to spot, but they might contain:
- an incorrect or false awarding organisation name;
- poor-quality or outdated logos;
- spelling errors or poor grammar; or
- an incorrect qualification title.

The best way to check the authenticity of a certificate is directly with the awarding organisation.

If you spot a fake certificate for sale you should report it to the relevant awarding organisation.

Fake or confidential exam materials

Students sometimes find assessments daunting and they may be nervous about their performance. If such students are accidentally given access to confidential materials, the temptation to use or share these materials can sometimes be too great. Such materials can now be shared through social media.

Awarding organisations monitor social media looking for such materials. Sometimes fake materials are sold online by fraudsters to try and steal money from students by taking advantage of their anxiety, self-doubt or desire to increase their chance of a good grade.

If you spot an exam paper, part of an exam paper or individual exam questions for sale, the best thing to do is to report it to the relevant awarding organisation.

Cybersecurity

Awarding organisations, schools, colleges and training providers hold personal data about their students and their work, and it is used to demonstrate performance in a qualification.

In the UK, follow the guidance issued by the National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) and the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) to protect this information.

Check qualification titles and awarding organisations on Ofqual's Register of Regulated Qualifications.

Common risks

- Selling a fake or confidential exam paper, part of an exam paper or individual exam questions.
- Falsifying student records.
- Making fake student entries to draw down funding.
- Selling fake certificates.
- Using a fake certificate to gain entry to a course, to obtain a job or to get a visa.

Taking action

If you suspect qualification fraud act promptly.

- Report it to the relevant awarding organisation.
- Report the incident to your relevant national law enforcement agency. In the UK this is Action Fraud (England, Wales and Northern Ireland) or Police Scotland (Scotland).

- Report the matter to the relevant regulator. In England this is Ofqual (if it relates to a regulated qualification), Ofsted (if it relates to how a school, college or training provider is operating) or the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA), Student Loans Company or Local Authority (if public funding of qualifications is involved).

If you work at an awarding organisation, school or college and have concerns about the delivery of an exam or assessment, you might be protected under whistleblowing legislation. See the **Ofqual whistleblowing policy** for more information.

CHECKLIST

BUILDING YOUR CHARITY'S DEFENCES

ASK YOURSELF:

- ☐ Do we have a clear up-to-date picture of the risks associated with qualification fraud?
- ☐ Have we identified and put in place appropriate controls to combat the risks?
- ☐ Are the qualifications we encourage employees to take regulated?
- ☐ Do we check authenticity of qualification claims by prospective employees?
- ☐ Do we follow good data protection and cyber security practices?

OTHER RESOURCES

Ofqual has produced a range of resources covering this area. See '**Understanding our rules**' and '**Supporting exam officers**'. Also see '**Ask Ofqual – common questions answered**'; '**Who is accountable for awarding qualifications?**' and '**Regulating GCSEs, AS and A levels: a guide for schools and colleges**'.

The **Independent Malpractice Commission** has made a number of recommendations to reduce and deter malpractice in the examinations system.

The UK's National Cyber Security Centre has produced guidance for charities on how to improve cyber security quickly, easily and at low cost. See '**Cyber security: small charity guide**'.

Preventing Charity Fraud contains resources to help charities prevent, detect and respond to fraud.