

# THE ANZAAS MERCURY

ANZAAS: Empowering the Community with Science

Issue No. 26, September 2005

## Editor's Edict



Please enjoy this issue with news about S&T issues. In **ANZAAS Debate** we have an in depth look at 'Instant degrees: tools for fools, fakers and malicious criminals?' We also present news from ANZAAS and the fascinating ANTENNA youth newsletter edited by Peter Toomer.

-Duncan Rouch

## Adam's Airing



Comment From The Chair  
By Paul ADAM

### Academic Freedom

Recently there has been considerable discussion about academic freedom, triggered by controversial comments from Macquarie University academic Assoc. Prof. Andrew Fraser.

I am reminded of a former colleague who had a sign on his door proclaiming, "My freedom is academic". Freedom of speech for academics, as for anyone else, has never been absolute. Apart from running the gauntlet of libel laws, there have been laws governing racism and protection of national defence secrets. In the wake of recent terrorist attacks, laws regarding incitement of terrorism either exist or are contemplated in a number of countries.

Within these constraints, there is nevertheless a long tradition of academics speaking and writing publicly about controversial issues. The very nature of science demands the questioning and testing of accepted wisdom so that scientists should be prepared to help inform public debate.

Some of the comments regarding Assoc. Prof. Fraser have suggested that academics should only speak on matters on which they are 'expert'. Superficially this would appear to be appropriate but who defines 'expert'? It denies the history of 'public' intellectuals - distinguished commentators (scientists

and others) who could discuss a wide range of issues in an informed way, without aspiring to be regarded as expert in all of them (such names as Prof. Eric Ashby and Sir Herman Black come to mind).

This tradition is, with very few exceptions, virtually extinct and Vice-Chancellors and other senior academics are not today public figures in the way some of their predecessors were. The quality of public debate is diminished by their absence.

If we encourage academics (and others) to contribute to public debate, within the constraints of the law, then we should at least expect the contributions to be well argued and supportable, even if the views are neither fashionable nor politically correct.

Some constraints on freedom to present data may be self inflicted - 'commercial in confidence' may delay publication until after intellectual property has been secured. Confidential arrangements have always applied to research conducted by industry, and research by defence organizations has necessarily a considerable 'secret' component. However, limitations on

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## Contents

<i>Editor's Edict</i> .....	1
<i>Adam's Airing-Comment From The Chair...</i>	1
<i>ANZAAS News</i> .....	2
<i>ANZAAS Debate: Instant degrees: tools for fools, fakers and malicious criminals?</i> .....	3
<i>An in depth analysis of legal and illegal chaos in the US and Internet education business sectors</i>	
<i>Perrin's Points</i> .....	7
<i>Media Report</i> .....	8

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publication of research conducted within universities and public institutions seems to me to be contrary to the nature and purpose of research. Nevertheless, the importance attached by university administrators to intellectual property means that this is a battle long lost. Despite the benefits a very few universities have won from intellectual property rights, however, these are very much the exception rather than the rule, probably akin to winning the lottery.

The recent discussion about the concept of “intelligent design” as an alternative to the Darwinian Theory of Evolution also raises questions of freedom of speech. Is it appropriate that “intelligent design” be taught in high schools in the science curriculum? Given that the concept is fundamentally un-testable I would argue that it is not science, and has no place in the science syllabus. If it is to have a place in the curriculum then it is in religious education. The Minister for Education, Dr. Nelson, has implied support for the teaching of intelligent design, but it is unclear whether he thinks it is science.

A potentially more serious threat to intellectual freedom is the Minister’s restructuring of the ARC (euphemistically described in the Minister’s press release as “enhancement”).

While this year’s round of grant applications are not affected, next year the Minister will determine which recommendations are successful. The process of peer review will not be changed, and budget restrictions will continue to mean that only a small proportion of quality applications will be rewarded. The impact of the changes will, given the current Minister, probably be negligible as far as science is concerned. However, proposals in the Arts and Social Sciences may be more controversial and be under greater threat. I hope this proves not to be case – the diversity of investigations and the range of viewpoints explored within the universities is important for the maintenance of culture. Given the very poor record of Australian philanthropy, research across the intellectual activity of universities remains reliant for support on the public purse. While increasing philanthropy is a noble goal, it is unlikely to be achieved rapidly. Historically, federal governments have shown little overt interference with the scope of university research - it would be extremely unfortunate if this tradition were to be lost.

*I would welcome any comments and suggestions for issues that could be addressed -e-mail: chair@anzaas.org.au,*

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## ANZAAS News

### Winifred Curtis celebrated at 100

Geoff FENTON

On June 15 this year, Dr Winifred Mary Curtis, a long-term Honorary Life Member (1990) and Fellow (1995) of ANZAAS, turned 100 years of age, while quietly living in retirement at the Queen Victoria Home in Lindisfarne, Tasmania. This event marks another achievement in her long association with the University of Tasmania.

Born in London and educated mostly in England, Winifred Curtis enrolled for a science degree course at University College, London, in 1924. She graduated with a BSc in 1927, with a medal and several prizes along the way. Interestingly, although she was always fascinated by plants, she enrolled in the enabling subjects Mathematics, Physics and Chemistry, as well as Botany.

After graduation, and the winning of a Postgraduate Scholarship for women, Winifred enrolled for an honours degree in Botany, at University College, London. She was inspired to continue her botanical studies by the staff there and also by those at Kew Botanic Gardens and the Kew Herbarium, many of whom were well known internationally. But it was now difficult to get jobs, due to the great depression in progress, so Winifred stayed on at University College as an Honorary Demonstrator to gain valuable teaching experience. She also enrolled at the Cambridge Teachers College, from which she obtained the Teachers Certificate in 1931. Next, she was appointed Senior Science Mistress at a newly established Girls High School in Manchester, and then in 1933 she was appointed as Biology Specialist at South Hamstead High School in London. Now in London, she was able to continue botanical research under the supervision of the Keeper of the Herbarium at Kew. This led to an MSc thesis, which was accepted in 1939. Meanwhile, Winifred’s civil servant father



Dr Winifred Curtis.  
Photo taken in 1988.

retired in 1938, with the desire to emigrate to a warmer climate. After researching the possibilities, Winifred and her parents arrived in Hobart in September 1939, soon after World War II began. Very soon, she had a part-time appointment as Demonstrator and Research Scholar in the Biology Department of the University of Tasmania, plus another part-time appointment as Science Mistress at Fahan, a private school for girls in Hobart.

While on the staff of the University of Tasmania, Miss Curtis realised the need for a textbook suitable for Australian high school Biology classes, and produced *Biology for Australian Students*, used by many generations of Australian school students. This was published in 1948, with revisions until 1962. In 1943 an official request had come for the Department to revise an out-of-print *Tasmanian Flora*. Winifred, in collaboration with others, tackled this major multi-volume work *Students Flora of Tasmania*, published between 1956 and 1994. This project led to another major general work, the six volume illustrated *Endemic Flora of Tasmania*, published between 1967 and 1978 during an interlude from the *Students Flora*. As a research project, Winifred studied the chromosomes of some Tasmanian plants, which culminated in a thesis for a PhD at University College, awarded in 1950. At the University of Tasmania she was also moving up the academic ladder: A full-time appointment as Assistant Lecturer in Biology in 1942, appointed Lecturer in Botany when the botany and zoology disciplines were separated in 1945, and promoted to Senior Lecturer in 1951, and to Reader in 1956. In 1968, she was awarded a DSc by the University of London, based on her published work. Then, in 1987 she received an Honorary DSc from the University of Tasmania.

Dr Curtis retired from the University of Tasmania in December 1966 and was appointed Honorary Research Fellow in Botany. This meant that although her formal teaching duties had ceased, she was now able to devote more time to complete the major publications and to work at the Tasmanian Herbarium, which had been important for her teaching and research, and which had been transferred to the new University site in 1946.

*Continued on page 7*

# The ANZAAS Debate - Instant degrees: Tools for fools, fakers and malicious criminals?

*Spam e-mails from the U.S. advertise instant degrees for credit from life experience, while some companies legally offer qualifications from unknown education providers and others make fortunes as unaccredited diploma mills. Following our earlier report on the dubious qualifications of TV dietary 'expert' Gillian McKeith (ANZAAS Mercury, March 2005) Duncan Roub discusses, 'What is going on with instant degrees in the U.S. education system and unregulated online education businesses elsewhere?'*

## Instant Degrees

Do you wonder why you have received spam e-mails that say you can get an instant degree without attending a higher education institution? These e-mails come from shady fly-by-night operators that are likely simply to take your money and issue you with a fake certificate.

A number of internet-based companies have complained that the spammers are giving them a bad name. These companies, like InstantDegrees.Com, based in Canada, legally offer to sell you a degree, based on your working experience. You simply tell them what you have done, which kind of qualification you wish to obtain, such as a diploma or masters of business administration (MBA), then pay them (upwards from US\$110) and await arrival of your selected certificate.

Remarkably the Instant Degrees company promises associate, bachelor, masters, professorship and doctorate degrees in any discipline or subject. Optional back dating is available and each degree comes with legal registration, official seal, cover letter and free verification services. Too good be true? Companies like this are not certified educational providers so how can this be legal?

There are two areas we need to look at to answer this question, how work experience can be awarded with a qualification in the U.S., and how the instant degree companies do that.

In 1996 the U.S. Department of Labor reported that there were four ways someone could earn non-traditional education credits:

- 1) Passing standardized exams,
- 2) Completing campus-based coursework,
- 3) Taking courses off-campus,
- 4) Demonstrating knowledge gained through experience.

The first three of these ways of assessing learning for credit are objective, such as by standardized tests. In contrast the fourth way, a review of life experiences, is more subjective, which as we will show can lead to instant degrees of dubious quality.

Earning non-traditional education credits in the U.S. can be used for awarding both high school and college qualifications. People who were prevented from finishing high school as teenagers have several options if they want to do so as adults. But the more practical alternatives for most adults are to take the General Educational Development (GED) tests or to earn a high school diploma by demonstrating their skills or taking

correspondence classes. The GED test is not easy, with about a quarter of applicants failing the test.

Adults can receive college credit for prior coursework, by passing examinations, and documenting experiential learning. With help from a college advisor, non-traditional students can assess their skills, establish their educational goals, and determine the number of college credits for which they might be eligible. Such students will need all relevant documentation such as school and training records.

Next, students need to determine their educational goals: What specific field do they wish to study? What kind of a degree do they want? Then, with the college advisor they determine how their past work fits into the field of study. Finally, the advisor will evaluate educational programs to find one that's suitable for the student.

As you can see the recommended procedure for gaining credit from life experience is somewhat more demanding and objective compared to the way instant degree companies do. Moreover while good colleges provide limited credit for life experience, as a way to encourage valuable further education, the instant degree companies go all the way to offer full credit for a range of qualifications.

Training by volunteer organizations and employers also can often provide objective college credit. The American Council on Education, for example, has two programs that assess thousands of specific courses and make recommendations on the amount of college credit they are worth. Colleges and universities accept the recommendations or use them as guidelines.

Furthermore, if a training course has not been accredited, recommendation should still be assessed by an advisor at the college

the potential student wants to attend. In this case the student should provide substantial documentation, such as course descriptions, class notes, and test scores. An oral examination or other demonstration of competency might also be required.

Credit for other kinds of experience, apart from training, 'Experiential learning credit', may be given for the knowledge gained. Relevant experiences include job responsibilities, personal hobbies, volunteer opportunities, and homemaking. Colleges and universities base credit awards on the knowledge a potential student has attained, not simply for the experience alone. In addition, the knowledge must be college level, as not just any learning will do. No such restriction is stated by the instant degree companies.

Moreover, adults attempting to get credit for their experience should be forewarned: having their experience evaluated for college credit by a genuine college is time-consuming, tedious work-not an easy shortcut for people who want quick-fix college credits. Not all experience, no matter how valuable, is the equivalent of college courses.

Once a potential student knows what credit to ask for, they must usually present their case in writing to officials at the college they plan to attend. The most common form of presenting experiential learning for credit is the portfolio. A portfolio is a written record of the potential student's



knowledge along with a request for equivalent college credit. It includes;

- An identification and description of the knowledge for which the student is requesting credit,
- An explanatory essay of how the knowledge was gained and how it fits into the student's educational plans,
- Documentation that the student has acquired such knowledge, and a request for college credit.
- Required elements of a portfolio vary by college but generally follow these guidelines.

Genuine colleges take the role of documentation for crediting life experience very seriously. Proof of knowledge can be shown in a variety of ways, including audio or video recordings, letters from current or former employers describing the applicant's specific duties and job performance, blueprints, photographs, artwork, and transcripts of certifying exams for professional licenses and certification. Although documentation can take many forms, written proof alone is not always enough. If it is impossible for an applicant to document their knowledge sufficiently in writing, their experiential learning can be assessed through supplemental oral exams by a faculty expert.

As we have seen, to gain genuine college credit for life experience in the U.S. takes a lot of work, including substantial documentation. So how can the instant degree companies legally promise not just college credit, but full degrees?

Close examination of information provided by the Instant Degree company indicates that it acts as an intermediary in the process, and sends clients reports on life experience to legal education providers of some kind. These appear to be not well-recognized public educational institutions, but instead small private operations that do not mind over crediting experience to certify a full diploma or degree, and have no reputation worth protecting. Thus is a qualification provided through the Instant Degree and similar companies really worth much at all?

Indeed while the Instant Degree company spends most of its alluring advertising to encourage customers to buy instant degrees, further into the site it is stated that, "We don't recommend this approach for most people. Earning a degree and buying a degree fast for a small fee are two entirely different deals." They then claim that, 'Credit for life experience earns a degree fast!', in contrast to the laborious legitimate process to obtain educational credit I discussed above. They go on to list online course options, associated with the legitimate credit processes. From this they make money by selling a book that lists legitimate courses, presumably information that can be found freely elsewhere on the internet.

## Diploma Mills

While the Instant Degree company operates legally, with shady advertising, other companies, called diploma mills, have been infringing trademarks of well known colleges and universities in order to make money out the credit for life experience. According to its December 1985 report, *Fraudulent Credentials*, the U.S. House Select Committee on Aging found that diploma mills fall into one of five categories, the three main classes being:

- **Official-looking mills** that use seals, crests, and other visual devices that ape those of legitimate institutions; frequently, they also include information about state approval or accreditation in order to lend credibility to the operation.
- **Sound-alikes** or schools with names very similar to those of well-known, often prestigious institutions,

Among the imitations of Ivy League schools included Cornell University and Dartmouth College.

- **Good-as-new outfits** that will replace diplomas "lost or damaged" by negligence, fire, or boating accidents. Confidentiality is always guaranteed.

Many diploma mills use names that are remarkably similar to those of well-known universities. Columbia State University and Cambridge State University — both defunct now — are cases in point. These institutions had absolutely no connection to the Ivy League school in New York or the famous university in England.

A few years ago, a reputable southern university sued a for-profit distance learning institution of the same name for trademark infringement and for tarnishing the school's name. The defending institution, which offered bachelor's and master's diplomas after one year of study, "awarded" an honorary degree to a corrupt businessman with close ties to the controversial military regime in Myanmar. Degrees ranged in cost from US\$2,850 to US\$7,400.

Columbia State University (CSU) advertised 27-day degrees and gave credit for "life experience." The cost of a home-study Ph.D. program through this scam school was US\$3,500. CSU graduates hail from all walks of life and have included local politicians, police officers and even a jailed member of the terrorist *Hamas* movement. After fleecing the public out of millions of dollars, Columbia State University and Cambridge State University were finally stopped in their tracks before they could inflict further damage. The *Chronicle of Higher Education* reported that both these institutions were shut down by court orders in 1998.

It is estimated that diploma mills rake in a staggering US\$200 million a year. Individually, they can generate up to between US\$10 million and US\$20 million annually. In Louisiana alone, where the laws governing higher education are riddled with loopholes, these fake universities enrol approximately 10,000 students worldwide. It is not uncommon for a large diploma mill to "award" as many as 500 Ph.D.s a month.

Much of this success can be attributed to the rise of the Internet, which enables diploma mills to effectively advertise programs online and reel in large numbers of degree-hungry consumers. According to John Bear, a former consultant and co-author of *Bears' Guide to Earning College Degrees Nontraditionally*, there are currently about 300 Web sites operated by bogus institutions, with one to two new sites being created each week.

But diploma mills have been around long before the Internet was created. Between 1983 and 1986, for instance, the FBI launched "Operation Dipscam" shutting down 39 illegitimate schools that were selling counterfeit academic credentials to anyone willing to pay the price. In the last decade though, the growth of the World Wide Web has provided a fertile breeding ground for con-artists of all stripes and colors, resulting in a resurgence of these fly-by-night operations. Now, with just the click of a mouse, one can find a plethora of sites selling bachelor's and master's degrees, Ph.D.s and even medical and law degrees in exchange for little or no academic coursework.

## Riding the Distance Education Wave of Enthusiasm

The advent of cyberspace, coupled with the escalating demand for academic and professional qualifications, paved the way for a new kind of distance learning in the 1990s: online education. After years of skepticism and censure, it is now acceptable, and in some cases even preferable, to earn a degree at a distance thanks to the revolution in information technology. To be sure, distance learning continues to generate controversy in many circles, both at home and abroad.

However, the growth and popularity of this trend during the last five or six years have been phenomenal, to say the least. A recent report predicts that online education will increase from 5 percent of all courses offered in the United States last year to 15 percent by 2002. Working professionals with little or no time to earn a degree at a campus-based institution can now do so in their spare time on the Internet. Hence, distance-learning advocates argue that online courses are breaking down traditional barriers to help expand the ranks of the educated around the world.

The dark side of this trend of course is the proliferation of scam operations peddling bogus degrees on the Information Superhighway. Although the FBI sting operation succeeded in knocking the wind out of the diploma-mill industry, the Internet has spawned a whole new generation of fraudulent schools online, which are surprisingly easy to set up and run. The closure of the federal government's diploma-mill taskforce, the laxity of many states to enforce the proper laws and the failure of the news media to adequately report cases of academic fraud have not helped matters.

## How They Operate

It doesn't take much to launch a digital diploma mill. In a couple of weeks, a skilled Web page designer can bang out a program, plug in graphics and images lifted from other sources to create something that looks very much like an authentic university homepage. "Campuses" are usually set up as post office boxes in one state and run out of private homes located in another. Money is often transferred to operations in other states with lower tax rates to maximize profits. It is also common for some diploma mills to camouflage themselves as religious organizations, which enjoy federal tax-exempt status.

Some of these institutions advertise as being accredited and often feature the names of the accrediting agencies on their Web sites. However, accreditation does not necessarily guarantee legitimacy. There are currently 35 accrediting agencies in the United States, not recognized by the Department of Education or the Council on Higher Education Accreditation, which will put their stamp of approval on just about any program with no questions asked. In many cases, the accrediting agencies in question are merely self-serving organizations set up by the diploma mills themselves.

Hence, to the unsuspecting eye, digital diploma mills can appear remarkably similar to legitimate distance learning institutions. "They take advantage of loopholes in state laws to operate legally," said Michael Lambert, executive director of the Distance Education and Training Council. "Most of them advertise as 'universities' or use words like 'academe' to wrap themselves in the king's cloak."

Many U.S. states either have weak laws regarding university charters or do not enforce existing laws. Louisiana and at least seven other states (Alabama, Hawaii, Iowa, Missouri, South Dakota, Utah and Washington) fall into this category. After years of laxity, California finally cracked down on diploma mills in the late 1980s. But many of the busted sham schools simply packed up and set up shop in other states, particularly Louisiana.

Other diploma mills transplant themselves in neighbouring countries, like the island nations of the Caribbean, where such laws don't exist at all. They can then establish a base of operations offshore and beam their Web sites into the United States without fear of legal hassles.

In addition, the worldwide trend toward distance learning is making it easier for the fake schools to blend in with the growing number of legitimate Web-based academic programs.

More than a third of U.S. colleges and universities currently offer distance learning via the Internet, and there are several "virtual" universities now that are exclusively online institutions.

"Diploma mill operations are riding on the periphery of the distance education wave of enthusiasm," said Lambert. "It is becoming increasingly difficult to separate the wheat from the chafe."

Compounding matters even more is the fact that there are significant gradations in the kind of non-recognized degree programs currently found online. Some are outright scams that

sell diplomas without requiring any work whatsoever. Others appear more ambiguous in terms of their legitimacy, offering short-term degrees in exchange for some form of academic work, like a thesis or dissertation. These organizations, according to Lambert and others, are the

most dangerous kind of diploma mills because they give the impression of being on the level.

Then there are the institutions that are struggling to gain recognition from a bona fide accrediting agency. Schools that fall into this category have legitimate academic purposes and conduct teaching but have not yet met accreditation standards. These institutions are definitely not diploma mills. In fact there are many unaccredited colleges operating in the United States that are entirely legitimate. So then how do we accurately define a diploma mill?

The commonly accepted definition of a diploma or degree mill is: *an entity that sells qualifications without requiring appropriate academic achievement at the post-secondary level. In many jurisdictions in and outside of the United States diploma mills are illegal.*

Not too long ago reporter Robert Sedgwick came across a Web site advertising instant degrees "in exchange for three years of work experience." This particular institution (which we'll call We-Scam U) would definitely come under the out-and-out fraud category. To see just how easy or difficult it was to buy a diploma online, Sedgwick called the 1-800 number provided on their homepage and spoke to a gentleman in the "admissions office." Sedgwick told him that he easily fulfilled the three-year work prerequisite and asked whether or not they required coursework of any kind, transfer credits, test results, a thesis or letters of recommendation from my employer.

"No, we make it real easy for you", he replied sheepishly. "Just send in your check, and we'll mail the diploma right out to you." It was as easy as that. For US\$350 and the cost of a stamp, anyone can acquire a bachelor's degree from We-Scam U via the Internet. The same institution also offers master's degrees for US\$475 and Ph.D.s for US\$800. And for bargain-conscious shoppers, all three qualifications are available for US\$1,200.

A degree with honors is a little extra: To have "*cum laude*" printed on the diploma costs an additional US\$35, *magna cum laude* is offered for US\$65, and for US\$75, anyone can be a *summa cum laude*.

Most people would argue that diploma mills deliberately and knowingly defraud the public, which is against the law. But many of these organizations vehemently deny doing anything illegal. Rather, they argue they are merely providing a service for people who want diplomas based on life- or job-related experience. In fact, such activities are not necessarily illegal under state or federal law, as discussed above, especially if the organization's mission is set forth in writing. We-Scam U, for instance, features a disclaimer at the bottom of its Web page clearly stating that the degrees they offer are strictly intended to bolster confidence and self-esteem. It further asserts that any illegal or improper use of the diplomas is not the responsibility of the "university," and the offer is void where prohibited by law.

Many U.S. states either have weak laws regarding university charters or do not enforce existing laws.

However, experts say this doesn't make them any less dangerous because holders of phony degrees go out and get jobs they are not qualified to perform. "It's like people who sell handguns," Lambert said of the disclaimer. "You have this 'what you do with it is none of our business' kind of attitude. Somebody is bound to get hurt sooner or later."

## Who are the Victims?

On one hand, there are the thousands of students who get duped each year, only to find out later that the degrees they acquired from these scam schools are not worth the paper they're printed on. "Our biggest concern is that they [diploma mills] claim to offer something to benefit students," commented Joanne Robinson, director of the College Credit Recommendation Service at the American Council on Education. "But what is the value of a degree if it's not accepted by graduate schools or if an employer runs a background check on an employee's qualifications and finds out that the person in question holds a fake degree?"

Students overseas are at even greater risk. Many foreigners enrolling in online programs based in the U.S. assume all institutions of higher education are regulated by the government, as is the case in their own countries, and many of them do not understand how accreditation works here.

Others contend that it's not so much the students who are getting ripped off. According to Bear, at least one-half of the "victims" who purchase academic qualifications from bogus institutions are "co-conspirators." In today's competitive world, an advanced degree is often the key to career advancement. A therapist with a Ph.D., for example, will attract more patients than a therapist with only an MA and will be able to charge more, as well. Hence, many people willingly and knowingly acquire diplomas dishonestly either for money, prestige or both.

Fake qualifications that are used for selfish and/or malicious purposes can potentially cause great harm to both employers and the general public, who have ultimately become the real victims of these scams. The news has been full of horror stories in recent years about doctors, lawyers and plastic surgeons practicing their professions with bogus qualifications, sometimes resulting in tragic consequences. Nor is it uncommon to hear about major corporations that fill top management slots with seemingly competent personnel, only to find out that those same employees obtained their credentials through diploma mills.

In addition, many experts put much of the blame on the news media for not taking enough interest in the diploma-mill scams and also for running advertisements. Diploma mills often advertise in respectable international newspapers and journals, including the *Economist*. Bear recently tried to dissuade the *Economist* from accepting advertising from diploma mills but claims he didn't get very far. When he attempted to submit a notice of his own warning readers about the dangers of scam schools, the *Economist* refused to run it on the grounds that it was unfairly critical of its advertisers, Bear said. Other big publications, including *USA Today*, *Forbes*, *Psychology Today*, *Discover*, *Investors Business Daily*, the *International Herald Tribune*, *Time*, *Newsweek* also run diploma-mill ads, according to Bear.

## Diploma Mills Abroad

Degree fraud is not exclusively an American phenomenon. Many other countries are grappling with this same problem, as

well. In India, for instance, the Board of Ayurvedic and Unani Systems of Medicine has exposed more than 2,500 bogus degrees issued in the name of various institutions of higher education located in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan. Students pay as much as US\$875 to obtain the fake certificates.

In Moscow, anyone can buy a blank diploma for US\$800 from a reputable university bearing an official stamp and enter the desired major and date of graduation. For an additional US\$50, you can get a blank, official transcript and then fill in the course titles and grades. A diploma with the stamp, signature from the school and an official serial number costs US\$10,000.

In the last few years, Indonesia has experienced an unwanted bonanza of diploma mills, especially since the legalization and proliferation of private education. Dr. Irid Agoes, executive director for the International Education Foundation, said that unlike their American counterparts, diploma mills in Indonesia tend to be campus-based instead of online. Some offer

master's degrees in six months and doctorate degrees can be earned in one year. Honorary doctorates are also offered, for a price. Other "schools" offer instant degrees in exchange for little or no work.

Agoes said that, according to a prominent psychologist recently quoted in an Indonesian daily, many Indonesians buy degrees because the society is essentially feudalistic and titles are still held in high esteem. "So people will do anything, including paying a lot of money, to obtain an advanced degree," she said. "Sadly, among this group are people of stature, such as government officials, high-ranking officers from the armed forces and other citizens in positions of power."

There are strict accreditation laws for institutions of higher education in Indonesia, which carry stiff penalties if violated. However, the diploma mills in question have ignored injunctions by the director general of higher education to shut down, claiming that they are accredited by agencies in the United States. Agoes said that, while this may be true, the accrediting bodies that approved the bogus schools are most certainly not recognized in the United States, or anywhere else for that matter.

## Solutions to the Problem

Supporters of distance education, and even detractors, advocate enforcing stricter state laws that would protect students and employers alike by forcing diploma mills to get licensed or close down. Because education has traditionally been the responsibility of the states, experts predict that over the next few years local governments will be compelled to learn how to better regulate technology-based courses and programs, in addition to the bricks-and-mortar schools.

But Henry Spille, one of the authors of *External Degrees in the Information Age*, argues that the states cannot take on this problem alone. "We need to resurrect in a formal way what we used to call in the old days 'the triad,' comprised of the federal and state governments and the accrediting bodies," he said. "There is insufficient communication between these three entities at the moment. They need to acknowledge the problem collectively and not worry so much about whose turf it's on."

Judith Eaton, president of the Council of Higher Education Accreditation, agreed. She said it is incumbent upon all parties to provide sound information to students, and the general public at large, about the potential dangers posed by the

**Fake qualifications that are used for selfish and/or malicious purposes can potentially cause great harm to both employers and the general public, who have ultimately become the real victims of these scams.**

diploma-mill industry. "There is more than enough information out there for the savvy consumer. But we still need to build an information base to help students distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate programs," she said. "And that is going to take time." *This article is partly based on the report, Diploma Mills, by Robert Sedgwick, Editor, eWENR.*

### List of useful Web sites for detecting diploma mills:

- **Degree.net** (<http://www.degree.net>): An online resource centre for information on distance learning provided by John Bear, Ph.D.
- **Council for Higher Education Accreditation** (<http://www.chea.org/directories/special.htm>): Lists approved specialized and professional accrediting organizations
- **Quackwatch** (<http://www.quackwatch.com/%20>): Your Guide to Health Fraud, Quackery, and Intelligent Decisions
- **Degreefinders.com** (<http://www.degreefinders.com/diplomamills.html>): Distance Learning Research & Consulting Service

- **US News & World Report**  
(<http://www.usnews.com/usnews/nycu/28dipbox.htm>): Top 10 Signs You May be Dealing with a Diploma Mill

### Recommended Reading:

- **Bears' Guide to Earning College Degrees Non-traditionally**  
(<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0962931241/ewenworleducnews>); by John Bear and Mariah Bear; 1996
- **External Degrees in the Information Age**  
(<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0897749979/ewenworleducnews>); by Eugene Sullivan, David W. Stewart, Henry A. Spille; 1997
- **M.A. Required, Ph.D. Preferred: An Odyssey Inside the Bogus Diploma Mill Circuit.**  
(<http://www.credentialwatch.org/reports/mcquaid.shtml>); an uproariously amusing and informing article, by "His Grace, the Rev. Bishop Dr. Edward St. Patrick" alias F.X. McQuaid.

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## Perrin's Points



NOTICES TO MEMBERS FROM THE HON. SECRETARY

**Nominations are urgently sought for a Divisional Secretary/Organiser for the ACT Division to relieve the load on Dr Sue Stockmayer**

The Council of ANZAAS has recently been discussing a return to staging themed Congresses, with the **Australian Synchronon** project and the forthcoming **International Polar Year** as possible core themes. Member's input is requested!

**DIVISIONAL MEETINGS** – Members are urged to support Divisional meetings of all kinds, and to particularly encourage the younger members to organise and participate in Divisional activities. It is *crucial to the long-term survival of ANZAAS as a credible entity* that the younger members begin to be brought into the management of the Association.

### **IMPORTANT INFORMATION!**

The University of Adelaide has re-located the ANZAAS office as part of its ongoing reorganisation.

The **physical address** of the ANZAAS head office is now located on the Commercialisation R & D Campus:

**30 – 32 Stirling Street  
THEBARTON  
South Australia 5031**

The **postal address** and **telephone number** remain unchanged:

**ANZAAS  
The University of Adelaide  
ADELAIDE  
South Australia 5005**

tel & fax: [08] 8303 4965

THE HEAD OFFICE IS NORMALLY OPEN ON MONDAY AND WEDNESDAY MORNINGS AND ALTERNATE THURSDAY AND FRIDAY AFTERNOONS. TEL: [08] 8303 4965

OCCASIONALLY, OPENING WILL BE ERRATIC DUE TO ANZAAS PARTICIPATION IN EVENTS AND PROJECTS WHICH REQUIRE THE OFFICE TO BE LEFT UNATTENDED. MEMBERS WISHING TO CONTACT THE HON. SECRETARY URGENTLY CAN CALL **0407 742 203**

*Continued from page 2*

Honours in recognition of her achievements have come frequently, including the Clive Lord Memorial Medal from the Royal Society of Tasmania (1966), the Australian Natural History Medallion (1976), Membership of the Order of Australia (1977), the Society for Growing Australian Plants Award (1988). The list continues for another ten or so awards, including the ANZAAS Mueller Medal (1995). In honour of the woman who founded the Tasmanian Herbarium, an exhibition was put on display in the foyer of the University's Morris Miller Library at the Sandy Bay campus in July, 2005.

### References

Banks, MR et al (Eds), 1991 (31:iii): ASPECTS OF TASMANIAN BOTANY—A TRIBUTE TO WINIFRED CURTIS. Roy. Soc. Tasm. Hobart: 1-6.

The Exhibition, *Dr Winifred Curtis, 100 Years of botanical research, teaching and travelling* is described in the University of Tasmania Newsletter Issue 279, 23/6/2005

Photo source: <http://www.anbg.gov.au/biography/curtis-winfred.html>

# Media Report

By Victor BIEN

## New Science Magazine



At this writing two issues of Cosmos have been released. I bought a copy of the second issue and found it impressive enough. However, comparing it with Guy Nolch's Australasian Science I couldn't help feeling it seemed to be too much duplication of effort given the small Australian market. I feel the problem of "too many magazines" personally.

This refers not only to the cost but also the time to read them. My mail box is flooded with Australian Consumers' Association Choice, Computer Choice and Consuming interest; Australasian Science, CSIRO's Ecos, Humanist Society journals, Time and three University Alumni magazines. If I decide I can afford Cosmos add that to the list. Since science is in everything they all often cover scientific topics. So the only aspect that makes Cosmos unique is its particular editorial style and articles mix, but that remark applies to everything I read. Further, reading isn't the only 'gate' to my mind. There are the internet, the newspapers, radio and TV.

Having said that it certainly makes good eye-catching copy for, say, doctor's waiting rooms. The high quality glossy pictures from for example the Martian rovers brought the Martian landscape right up close. On further thought the quality may be so high that the magazine might 'walk'! If that happens then the object of getting science to more lay people would be compromised. The waiting room would revert to the women's magazines! It seems unlikely that many doctors and dentists would buy it for their waiting rooms. Besides women's magazine things like the Bulletin, National Geographic and Readers Digest dominate.

Indulging in a bit of ego-tripping I note that the photo of the Asian face as the man from the 11th dimension (Michio Kaku)

looks rather like me! However, Michio's mathematical ability would be 11 dimensions greater than mine! He conducts research into the incredible String Theory. Being interested in evolution, - articles Relative Obscurity and The Eyes have it were appreciated; the material basis of the 'soul' - You are what you think by Steven Pinker likewise. The pages after that article displaying fancy electronic gadgets available on the market makes the magazine reminiscent of EAT (Electronics Australia Today) which is no longer published.

## TV History of DNA Science

During this quarter ABC TV showed a four part series on DNA - its discovery, the human genome project, unravelling cancer and future use of 'the secret of life'. The form and style of the series is an evolution from the approach of David Attenborough's. The style was adapted and developed by WGBH & PBS (Public Broadcasting Service in the US) and the BBC where ideas probably bounced back and forth between each organisation. There was the WGBH & PBS broadcast series on evolution, the BBC's Walking with Dinosaurs, and now DNA. The story of how Crick and Watson worked out the structure of DNA came across to me much more clearly than before. The crucial role of Rosalind Franklin's high quality X-ray pictures clears away her obscurity, which the awarding of the Nobel prize to Crick, Watson and Wilkins brought about. Wilkins and Franklin did not get on. Today there is a statue of Franklin's head in a college providing inspiration for young women to pursue a scientific career.

The story of DNA is probably more important to the personal lives of ordinary persons than any other scientific achievement over the last 50 years. A measure of this importance is shown by the number of scientists who have become fabulously wealthy through work associated with it. The series showed what these people did and do and why they are so successful. James Watson himself has become a millionaire.

If undeliverable, please return to:  
Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science  
The University of Adelaide, Adelaide, SA 5005