The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Fake Diplomas No Longer Buy a University Education

By Khristina Narizhnaya

August 31, 2011



Filipp's high school grades were so bad that eventually he stopped going. After a few months he decided to make a fresh start in college. Re-enrolling in high school would take too long, he figured. Buying a high school diploma seemed like a good solution.

But when Filipp, then 18, showed up to apply to a university several years ago with the diploma he purchased in the metro station, the admissions officer laughed.

"Boy, you better leave quick, before I call the police," she told him.

With the start of the new school year Thursday, many young people, like Filipp, are willing to pay to take the easy way out. But getting by with a fake diploma is not as easy as it once was.

Employers and educational institutions have become more discerning while applicants for schools and jobs have grown more qualified.

Spotting a Fake

"A fake diploma is not that hard to identify," said Yury Virovets, president of recruiting agency Head Hunter.

Real diplomas, both college and the less often imitated high school ones, contain intricate patterns that cannot be replicated, Virovets said.

A Russian university diploma is a document with the school's name, the graduate's name and some stamps inside a blue folder — for those with excellent grades the folder is red. The names of the university and the student and stamps are different, but the basic document is the same for all schools, depending on what year it was awarded.

Most counterfeit diplomas are made using an original document. The client's name is written on a real blank diploma, which is then signed and stamped.

The documents are stolen or obtained from corrupt university workers. Some are left over from the 1990s. During the "wild '90s" a large number of college diploma documents were stolen. They soon became a hit on the black market.

Why Use a Fake?

"People got career opportunities and thought why not?" said Viktoria Burkovskaya, head of Egorov, Puginsky, Afanasiev & Partners' white-collar crime practice. "They bought it, forgot about it and moved on with their lives."

As those people moved up in their careers, the sham sometimes surfaced. Some got jobs in the government, which requires a background check.

Several officials were recently fired after they were found to have used fake diplomas, including the head of the education department in Lviv, Ukraine, the regional prosecutor for the southern Russian republic of Karachayevo-Cherkesia and the deputy mayor of Berdsk, a town in the Novosibirsk region.

A Profitable Business

Fake college diplomas cost an average of 30,000 rubles ($1,000) but can sell for up to four times that amount. One criminal group was busted two years ago for selling fake Harvard diplomas for $40,000 each.

Before, those who needed a college or high school diploma, or just about any document, went down to the subway and approached people holding up cardboard signs that read "diploma."

A few of these metro merchants are still around, but many fake diploma schemes have gone digital. Just type in "buy a diploma" in Russian. Dozens of web sites beckon with an array of marketing techniques.

One Russian web site, diphelp.com, offers free delivery of the diploma to any part of the world.

Another site, nextdiplom.ru, features a young woman in a strapless dress holding books

in one hand and making the "OK" sign with her fingers.

Yet another site features a stack of books on a black background and useful advice, in Russian and English. There are two ways of getting diplomas. There is the legal way, the site tells you. But then it goes on to point out that getting an actual diploma will take up to six years. Next is a link to an application to buy a diploma.

But it says "bye" a diploma instead of "buy."

These web sites are open for business because of hazy Internet regulation, Burkovskaya said. It is not clear who should be prosecuted and what the punishment should be for these web sites.

Checking Bona Fides

An easy way is to discover the validity of a diploma is to call up either the Education Ministry or the university from the person claims to have received the degree. This process, however, is usually expensive and time-consuming — not viable for most small companies.

Usually only large companies, banks and government institutions do background checks, experts said. Those candidates with access to the company's finances or commercial secrets are especially scrutinized, Virovets said.

For most small businesses background checks are only done if the applicant's behavior, age or other characteristics seem to be at odds with the diploma, human resource experts said.

Getting a job with a fake diploma is not easy these days. The interview process is often grueling. To get a good position, several interviews with different managers are required.

"While [Unilever] does not do background checks on applicants, it would be very difficult for someone to fake the education and experience required for the job because of the rigorous interview process," said Alexei Bakanov, personnel manager at the consumer products giant.

Demand Declining, Alternatives Expensive

Improved education opportunities, such as study abroad programs, have made the domestic work force more professional. As the country's economy grows and becomes more sophisticated, the demand for fake diplomas declines.

Only 8 percent of working Russians have bought fake diplomas, according to a June survey by recruiting agency JobList.ru.

About five years ago the market for fakes began getting squeezed from all sides by the police and employers themselves, who are now pickier over whom they hire, said Georgi Dobromelov, deputy director of the Institute for Political Research.

Bribing university officials to enter someone's name into the school's database happens but could get to be very expensive, Burkovskaya said. A false entry showing that a person completed a course could cost $500.

A cheaper, legal way to obtain a dubious diploma is by attending a third-rate college, usually unlicensed, that gives out diplomas to anyone who pays. These places of higher learning usually consist of no more than a couple of rented offices and do not have rigorous education standards. There are no official numbers, but experts say such institutions have mushroomed in the last decade.

"You can get a diploma at a bad university legally, without committing any crimes," Burkovskaya said.

Getting a job with diplomas from unlicensed universities is also not easy, Dobromelov said. Today's employers look for people with a reputable education and real skills.

"The country is becoming more civilized," Dobromelov said. "There is less demand for fake diplomas. It's the market mechanism."

Filipp figured this out and eventually completed high school. Now he is enrolled in a college, where he hopes to earn a diploma.

Two policemen and a traffic police inspector will be on duty at every school in Moscow on opening day, according to Vyacheslav Kozlov, head of the capital police's department of public order, Interfax reported Wednesday.

"On the eve of Sept. 1, all Moscow schools and kindergartens are being checked for security by our staff," Kozlov said.

"On Sept. 1 ... the police will have handheld metal detectors, and any citizen that arouses suspicion will be searched," Kozlov said. He also mentioned that all Moscow schools are equipped with alarms that summon help within five minutes.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2011/08/31/fake-diplomas-no-longer-buy-a-university-education-a9258