



Education

YOU SAY: A tribute to Andrew 'Poon Sir' **E4**

Founders of fraudulent university in jail, HK associate still selling courses

St Regis 'dean' in business

Will Clem, Elaine Yau and Mimi Lau

The man who was "dean of studies" at fraudulent St Regis University is still selling distance learning qualifications in Hong Kong.

The US operation was closed following an investigation and its founders were jailed.

But Steve Ho Kwok-cheong – one-time Asia representative of its business school and St Regis School of Martial Arts – continues to provide online courses up to PhD level from "universities" you have probably never heard of and others which have never heard of him.

Until this week, Mr Ho's company – ICL Distance Learning Centre – offered online courses from 11 universities in the US, Central America and the Philippines that it claimed to be authorised to recruit or offer distance programmes for, either through affil-

World-Wide House and a tiny public accountant's office in Tsim Sha Tsui.

When a reporter finally made contact with Mr Ho by phone yesterday morning, he said he had done nothing wrong.

"We just provide the course materials," he said. "As this is pure online learning, with no face-to-face classes, we do not need to register with the Education Bureau."

He said the majority of his students were not based in Hong Kong.

However, earlier this week he had been keen to help a *Post* reporter posing as a customer looking for a fast track to a degree.

ICL's website describes Mr Ho as an "educational professional" who has "been a full/part-time lecturer for different famous worldwide universities/post-secondary institutes, such as University of Sydney, OUPHK, City University (UK), University of Heriot-Watt and University of Wollongong, since 1991".

Checks at SydneyU, Wollongong, Heriot-Watt and London's CityU revealed none had a record of employing him. Open University was unable to confirm or deny the connection by the time of going to print.

Mr Ho said the positions had been in Hong Kong – "lecturing" at evening courses run by local companies on the universities' behalf. "I was a lecturer teaching in Hong Kong."

The website also states Mr Ho has a PhD, although it does not specify where he obtained it.

The *Post* investigation discovered it was from York University, Mobile, Alabama – not to be confused with its namesakes in Canada or Britain – which lists Mr Ho as a member of its academic board.

Inquiries with Alabama authorities confirmed YorkU had no official accreditation and was illegal.

An application for a licence is pending, but Annette McGrady, the private school licence specialist handling the case, said it was "highly unlikely" to succeed due to concerns about the capacity of their faculty.

"They have never been licensed in Alabama," she said. The school had also been given a written warning about selling "honorary degrees" to Hong Kong, she said.

No calls to YorkU – which operates from a lawyer's office – were re-

The big picture



Not quite a campus: World-Wide House with an office services centre in Room 2301, and ICL's registered company address in Kowloon (above). West Coast Institute of Management and Technology claims its admin centre is in suburban Melbourne (left). Unregistered York University in Alabama, US, operates out of a lawyer's office (right).



Before and after: ICL's website dropped references to York University, University of Washington and West Coast University after the *South China Morning Post* confronted director Steve Ho Kwok-cheong.

SCMP GRAPHIC

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Steve Ho Kwok-cheong, former St Regis representative

iation or collaboration. The courses ranged from sub-degree, undergraduate to postgraduate qualifications.

By yesterday, five of these universities had been removed from ICL website – www.icledu.org – following the *South China Morning Post's* investigation into Mr Ho's activities.

The investigation discovered that at least two were either unlicensed or did not exist, and four genuine universities denied having connections with Mr Ho, ICL or Ho's other company, In-Com Link Management Associates.

The search for Mr Ho led to *Post* reporters trawling through virtual miles of cyberspace, making calls across four continents at all hours this week before arriving at two apparently unconnected addresses in Central – an office services centre in

turned. However, the *Post* received an e-mail from a "Professor Akiva Fradkin" containing a digital image of a purported official licence. It expired on November 1, 2006.

Mr Ho confirmed his PhD had been from YorkU but insisted it was a genuine qualification.

"I had to submit coursework online and it was assessed," he said.

Mr Ho said being on the academic board meant he could design courses, which could be accredited by YorkU and offered through ICL under the Alabama centre's name.

"I just care about developing a high-quality, pure online learning course," he said.

He said the lack of official recog-

Faking it in Iran **E2**

Deceit by degrees **E6**

nised accreditation – YorkU is accredited by an unofficial organisation which only accredits similar small private outfits – did not concern him as accreditation was "very personal".

Mr Ho declined to explain his relationship with the St Regis University scandal, but did not deny involvement.

He said he did not like St Regis' approach of "just selling" degrees without requiring coursework.

"At least [my students] have to complete coursework. They can fail and some of them do," he said.

Just a fool's paradise

West Coast University, Panama, advertises itself as a place to learn in idyllic tropical surroundings.

"Panama's natural beauty, unspoiled beaches, historic sites and economic dynamism are available as to extend learning beyond the classroom," writes president Sarfraz Lloyd in his introduction on the institute's website.

In reality, students at the dubious Central American "university" may well have difficulty extending their learning to as far as the classroom.

The West Coast's website gives its "physical address" as being part of International University in Panama City. However, a call to the number listed was met with a mystified response.

"I have never heard of that university," a member of staff said. "This is International University."

She confirmed that the address on the website was accurate. "But that is our address," she said.

West Coast's website states it is accredited by the International Parliament of States for Safety and Peace – a shady, quasi-inter-governmental organisation based in Palermo, Sicily, which claims to have

members including Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez.

The Panama university is an offshoot of West Coast Institute of Management and Technology – based originally in Perth, Australia, which had listed its marketing and administrative offices as an address in Melbourne.

The *Education Post* investigation has discovered that location to be a small suburban bungalow.

The Melbourne address was removed from the website following enquiries from the *Post* to Australian authorities about the institute's legal status. Enquiries drew a blank.

Babar Peters, the Melbourne contact originally named on the site, said he had not had anything to do with West Coast "since the late 1990s" when he had done some contract marketing.

"As I understand it, they voluntarily surrendered their registration to the Australian government in about 1999 or 2000, and that is when I stopped dealing with them."

Dr Peters declined to say which university his own PhD was from.

Will Clem and Geoff Maslen

Scammers 'on the rise'

There has been an alarming increase in the number of agencies offering bogus university accreditation and degrees in recent years, a senior academic warns.

Senior adviser to the vice-chancellor of the University of Hong Kong, John Spinks, said he had seen a rise in the number of commercial providers of accreditation and degrees that were far from reputable.

"In the last few years, we have seen the emergence of another type of institution, those that are purely online and do not have any required links to any one country," he said. This produces another set of problems since they are not subject to the approval mechanisms of any country's accreditation system.

He advised students to check out who the providers of accreditation were and whether these agencies were respectable.

More people were enrolling in higher education, he said, as its value was increasingly appreciated.

"That's where the pressure comes and gives rise for commercial opportunities," Professor Spinks said. He said a lack of accreditation

agencies in some Asian countries allowed providers of degree mills and private institutions that were not well funded to operate in the countries.

Professor Spinks said the easiest way to determine the integrity of accreditation agencies and universities was to check with official sources, which were easily found online.

He warned that students should be careful with distance learning programmes and institutions as they were difficult to evaluate.

British Council Hong Kong's director for education services, Katherine Forestier, said overseas courses taught in Hong Kong could be verified against the Education Bureau's non-local courses registry.

A list of sites with pages to check accreditation agencies and courses in Hong Kong, the US, Australia and UK: www.hkcaavq.edu.hk www.chea.org www.ed.gov www.auqa.edu.au www.qaaa.ac.uk

Mimi Lau

EducationDigest

Video conferencing

Law students to link up with top scholars
City University is to video-link its law students with world-class professors from Yale and Oxford universities. From this semester, students on CityU's international investment law and civil procedure courses will be able to take part in two-hour seminars each week with Yale Law School's professor of international law Michael Reisman and University of Oxford's professor of civil procedure Adrian Zuckerman. CityU law school dean Wang Guiguo said: "International legal education via video conferencing is a necessity as it's the most efficient way for us to get top scholars worldwide." Mimi Lau

University title

Chu Hai pins hopes on next academic year
Chu Hai College of Higher Education is hoping to obtain university status in the next academic year, its president said this week. The college began offering accredited degree courses last month after receiving approval last year. President Chang Chung-nan said the college planned to become the second private university after Hong Kong Shue Yan University and had submitted a plan to the Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications. He said he could not foresee anything that would get in the way of the fight for university title. Elaine Yau

Going green

Climate on fair agenda
The British Council will hold an environmental fair next Saturday for secondary school students to discuss ways to stave off climate crises. Open to students in Forms Two to Four and Form Six, the Youth Action Against Climate Change Environmental Fair is part of the council's Climate Cool project. The project is co-funded by the Environment and Conservation Fund and Environmental Campaign Committee. The fair will be held from 10am to 4pm at Elegancia College, 8 Ching Shing Road, Sheung Shui. Schools interested in the fair can e-mail climate.cool@britishcouncil.org.hk Elaine Yau

Offers, U-turns and outright lies

A reporter posing as a potential customer who had failed to finish university studies and needed a degree contacted ICL Distance Learning Centre for help.

A man calling himself Mr Luk phoned back and said the company could offer distance learning courses with accreditation from Philippines Nueva Ecija University of Science and Technology. A credit transfer would cost HK\$49,000.

But Nein Gutierrez, the university's presidential technical assistant, said only one organisation in Hong Kong was authorised to conduct courses on its behalf – and it was not ICL.

Alex Lee Ye-luck, chairman of Lifelong Education, the company representing the university, said he had never heard of ICL.

Later, Mr Ho called with another offer. "We can help you get a degree from Southern Christian University [Universidad Cristiana del Sur] in Costa Rica," he said.

He phoned again later, saying: "We have just called Southern Christian University. They said they couldn't do it. We recommend York University. It's a licensed private American university."

Checks revealed York, in Alabama, to be unaccredited, unlicensed and illegal. It had already been warned by authorities to stop selling honorary degrees in Hong Kong.

In later talks with Mr Ho, he backtracked on earlier statements. "We cannot actually offer courses for the Philippines university. Mr Luk is a consultant for the university doing marketing and overseas enrolment businesses for them," he said.

After the phone calls, references to Philippines Nueva Ecija University were removed from ICL's website.

Elaine Yau

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