FIFTY SHADES OF FAKE UNIVERSITY DEGREES

On Sunday, Declan Walsh delivered a blockbuster report on the vast network of fake univeristies, diplomas for purchase and high-pressure upsales of “validation” credentials for fraudulently purchased diplomas. Remarkably, the company in which these activities were housed, Axact, with headquarters in Karachi and offices throughout Pakistan, had enjoyed a role as a prominent software company billing itself as Pakistan’s biggest software success story. Despite the massive amount of evidence compiled by Walsh and the Times, Axact initially pushed back hard, trying to threaten the Times with legal action and even going after a local Pakistani blog that merely accumulated amusing Tweets relating to the story.

Today, authorities in Pakistan took decisive action, with as many as 45 Axact employees arrested and the seizure of computer equipment and files:

> According to Express News, employees were evacuated from the software company’s head office in Islamabad. Further, around 45 employees were rounded up, including HR and PR managers, to be taken to FIA headquarters.
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> The arrested Axact employees were shifted to FIA’s cyber-crime wing office.
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> The seven-member FIA team also seized hard disks, computers, other electronic equipment and documents belonging to the IT firm. The bags and mobile phones of department heads in Islamabad have also been seized.
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> /snip/
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> The FIA also raided Axact’s call center

> in Rawalpindi and seized voice call and other devices. Axact's regional director Colonel (retd) Jamil has been taken into custody.

With "university" names like Columbiana and Barkley, the cynicism of Axact's scam is breathtaking. But once I started thinking about it, I realized that the new world of online degrees is a very cutthroat place with questionable marketing practices everywhere. Just right here in Gainesville, the University of Florida has raised many eyebrows with its decision this year to admit an extra 3000 students who would not otherwise be admitted and then inform them that they have to complete the first year of studies toward their degree online. But don't worry, poor little online second class students, because at UF, even if you complete your entire degree online, your diploma won't reflect that fact. Here's the very first entry on the FAQ's for UF online:

It's a highly competitive world for those online degrees, whether they come from fake diploma mills, for-profit "universities" or traditional universities being forced by backwards legislators to come up with online competition.

Call me old-fashioned, but my concept of a university education involves an actual university with libraries housing real books,

laboratories where real experiments can take place, lecture halls where students and professors actually interact face to face and a shared site where a community moves about freely. Sure, fake diplomas from legitimate universities do get penned now and then, but the market for fakery has been enabled greatly by the rapid expansion of online “learning”.