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Ontario students arrested in connection with counterfeit ring

University diplomas, visas, marriage certificates among documents seized

KATERYNA TOPOL
The Excalibur

TORONTO (CUP)—York Regional Police recently arrested five students who alleged to be part of a massive counterfeit document ring.

On 12 April, police confiscated counterfeit equipment and hundreds of fraudulent documents from a home in Markham, ON. Police seized passports, marriage certificates, student visas, postsecondary diplomas and degrees from several Ontario institutions.

The group has produced "hundreds if not thousands" of counterfeit documents, according to York Region Police Superintendent Wayne Kalinski.

A flyer discovered at the crime scene advertised student visas for \$1500, education qualification documents signed by a notary public for \$1000, and application papers offering direct entry into specialized programs for \$3000.

According to Detective Fred Kerr, the untrained eye would not be able to tell the difference between the fraudulent documents and the legitimate ones.

"There is a criminal market for these types of fraudulent documents," York Regional Police Chief Armand La Barge said.

York University, one of the postsecondary institutions whose documents were forged, is concerned that document fraud could negatively affect the reputation of postsecondary institutions.

"Honouring of degrees is at [the] heart of what we do, and this incident has the potential for damaging our reputation." Keith Marnoch, a spokesperson for York University, said. "There were many institutions involved, and York is unfortunately a part of it, and preventing this from happening again is something we continually work on."

"Honouring of degrees is at [the] heart of what we do and this incident has the potential for damaging our reputation."

**KEITH MARNOCH,
YORK UNIVERSITY**

"We do have measures to protect these kinds of documents, and we update them regularly. But computer technology is getting more sophisticated, making it more difficult for us to protect valuable documentation," he added.

"What people should know is that if anyone is in the possession of these papers, and they know about it, it is a violation of the criminal law," Murnoch stressed.

As the ability for fraud artists to produce high-quality replicas of official documents goes up, so too does the private-market demand to verify the qualifications of prospective

employees.

Remell So, a recruiter for the Employment Solution employment agency, said that his firm will verify the qualifications of some prospective employees as a safeguard against fraudulent degrees, but the initiative is far from being a regular part of his company's services.

"It depends on the client. Some ask for it, some don't," he said. "Normally, you could tell by the person's background if they have been working in the industry for 'x' amount of years. We would pay more attention if it is a new grad, but in most cases we don't."

For Ontarian postsecondary institutions who have been targeted, protecting their reputation means sharing their list of graduates with anyone who asks.

"We know who has graduated from York, and we openly share this information with whoever wants to know," Marnoch said.

Students are also concerned that their work will be rendered less meaningful with the proliferation of fake diplomas.

"I, like all of us, have paid towards my degree," said Carolina Espinosa, a psychology student at York. "But it's not just about the money; it's also about all the work I have put in throughout the years. I go to school so I can have a privilege over someone who did not when looking for a job. Knowing that there are people out there who are getting the job I want with a false degree is very unfair."

PIA wishes for increased advocacy

PIA B-DAY • CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

For example, in fall 2005, following a promise made by former Premier Ralph Klein that Alberta would have the most affordable tuition in Canada, Dave Hancock, then Alberta's Advanced Education Minister, announced a tuition increase for the 2004-2005 academic year.

Because PIA representatives were present at this announcement, they reminded reporters about Klein's promise. Klein, when told of the discrepancy, contradicted Hancock, ultimately meaning no tuition increase for the year.

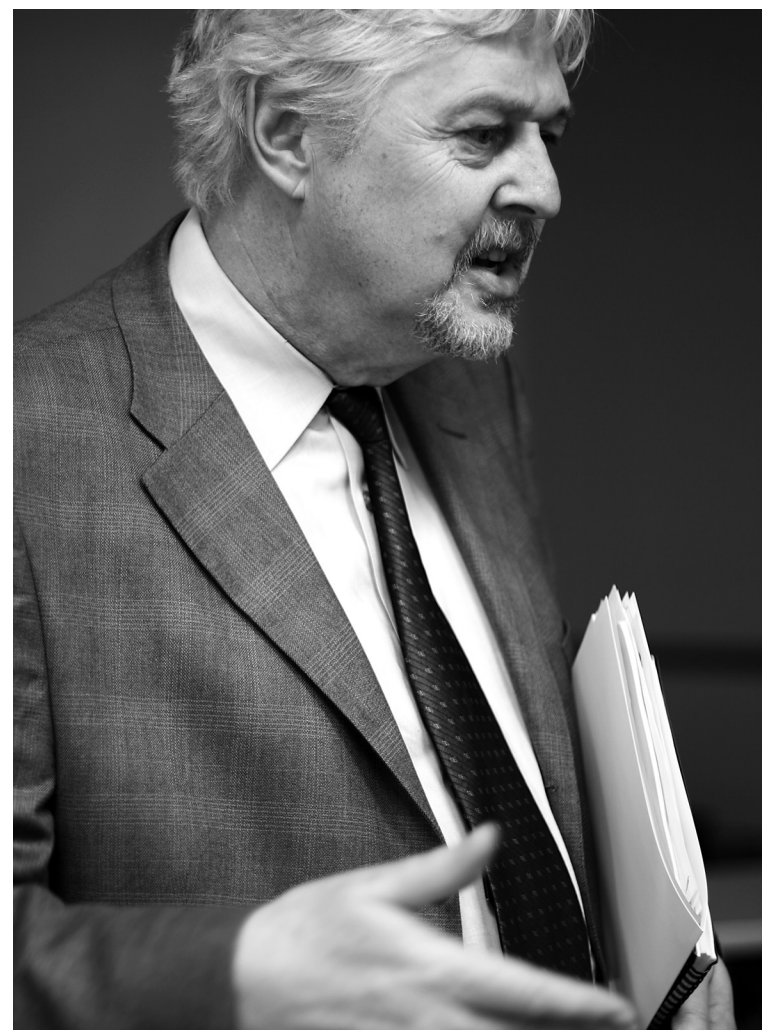
Despite PIA's political activity, Booi, who co-founded PIA as President of the Alberta Teachers' Association in 2004, maintains the group is non-partisan, adding that many of their member organizations would not join if it was.

"The fact you're non-partisan doesn't mean you're not political. You can be very political and be engaged in political issues, but not partisan," Booi said.

Moore-Kilgannon said their newest campaign, which focuses on the environmental impacts of the oilsands, will begin in July. One key part of their campaign surrounds the Alberta government's plan to export bitumen to the US for processing.

Bitumen is the material extracted from the oilsands that gets refined into crude oil. Moore-Kilgannon said 18 000 Albertan jobs could be lost in due to the planned exports.

"Our main role is to try and get more people to be aware of the public policy issue being decided," he said,



KIM SMITH

ALL ABOUT ACTION Larry Booi says Public Interest Alberta will keep growing.

acknowledging it will be difficult to change the government's decision.

However, Moore-Kilgannon stated PIA's future looks positive.

"We're just three years old, in the

beginning steps of doing this work, and I think people are very impressed with the level of activity and the ability of us to have influence in this process."