

Barefaced Cheating in China's Bull Market for Academic Fraud

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A 17-year-old student at the Jiangsu College for International Education in Nanjing China, Jiao Yizhou hopes to study environmental engineering at the Georgia Institute of Technology in the United States.

Like many applicants to university, however, he is anxious about the entrance tests and essays. He knows that other Chinese students cheat on the applications, persuade their teachers to falsify secondary-school grades and recommendations, and hire agents who purportedly write the admission essays for them.

"This kind of thing does not bother me, because I did it the right way, and the university officials are not stupid," Mr. Yizhou said. "They can know which applications are real and which are fake."

But increasing competition for spots in Western universities, and huge annual increases in the number of applicants from China, do have admissions officials worried about what experts say is a widespread and growing practice of cheating.

“I don’t mean to caricature this as happening at every school,” said Linda McKinnish Bridges, associate dean of admissions and director of program development in China for Wake Forest University. “But some schools I’ve visited have said to me, ‘We will work with you in any way we can to get these students into the United States.’”

Ninety percent of recommendation letters for Chinese applicants to Western universities are falsified, according to research by NAFSA: Association of International Educators and the US-based educational consulting company Zinch China.

The two organizations, which conducted interviews with 250 students at the top-ranked secondary schools in China, also concluded that 70 percent of admissions essays are written by someone other than the applicant, half of secondary-school transcripts are doctored, and many awards and achievements are also fake.

“Fraudulent applications are pervasive in China, driven by hyper-competitive parents and aggressive agents” who can earn financial bonuses for getting students into top Western universities, said the researchers, who called this “a growing trend.”

They said the phenomenon was driven mostly by middle-class Chinese parents determined that their children study abroad, 80 percent of whom pay agents to help them. The going rate for this, per student, is up to US\$10,000—and as much as double if the agent can get the student into a university at the top of the influential *U.S. News & World Report* rankings.

“The cultural norm in China is to consider a 17-year-old not yet capable of managing a decision as important as his or her college education,” the Zinch and

NAFSA report said. Or, as Dr. Bridges put it, Chinese parents “have got one child and for that one child you will do everything you can to help that child get ahead.”

Agents, the researchers said, will ghost-write admissions essays or hire recent returnees from Western universities, or expatriate English-speaking teachers in China, to do it. There are also separate essay-writing services available.

Chinese officials acknowledge the problem. It’s a “legitimate concern,” said Rob Cochrane, the Australian-born international programs manager at the Jiangsu Provincial Department of Education. But he said that the blame lies with the application process. “Just the nature of that process over distance provides a huge opportunity for the not-so-ethically minded to perhaps fudge their credentials,” Mr. Cochrane said. “The whole idea of a written application from a second-language applicant, whether from China or anywhere else on the planet, is fraught with danger.”

Nor is China the only place where applicants to Western universities allegedly cheat. In May, the US Educational Testing Service canceled the scheduled administration of the SAT entrance exam in South Korea, where test-preparation services reportedly got copies of the questions in advance. “The issue is about the process rather than about the people who are applying,” Mr. Cochrane said.

Whatever the reason for it, all of this cheating is vastly complicating the work of admissions officers buried in applications from China, at universities accepting more and more of them to help bring in much-needed revenue.

UNESCO estimates that 440,000 Chinese are studying abroad, and the United States and the United Kingdom are the first- and second-most popular destinations.

China sends, by far, more students to the United States than any other country—nearly 200,000 a year, almost four times as many as it did at the start of the millennium, representing fully one in four of the international students coming to the country—and the number has grown by 20 percent or more in each of the last five years. In spite of visa changes, the number of Chinese students in the United Kingdom also is continuing to rise. It was up 8 percent last year.

At Wake Forest, which has gone from 79 applications from China to more than 600 annually in just the last five years, Dr. Bridges, who speaks fluent Mandarin, visits Chinese secondary schools, and he and other admissions counselors conduct interviews in English with students over Skype, while having them simultaneously complete sample writing assignments—all to weed out fraud. “If that student is very strong, but I have some reservations about their English ability—if the student does not understand and I have to revert to Mandarin—then that student is not coming to Wake Forest,” she said.

Another survey by Zinch China, which tested the language skills of 25,000 prospective Chinese students, found that two-thirds did not speak English well enough to use it in a classroom discussion. That is up from 38 percent whose English skills were judged deficient last year. The proportion of students whose language skills were judged as “strong” fell from 18 percent to 4 percent.

Mr. Cochrane said that Chinese students become so good at taking standardized tests, including the Test of English as a Foreign Language, that, “It

wouldn't be unfair to say that, with decent preparation and practice, they would probably be able to get a score marginally higher than their actual communicative skills" merit.

Talk of cheating may result in changes in China, Mr. Cochrane speculated. "There's a lot of talk about it at our end. Cheating is not accepted here as being the norm, though lots of people ask me that question. The Chinese people are a proud people. They don't want to be branded pariahs on the education system."

One solution, he said, would be to require the accreditation of agents—another: accepting hard-to-counterfeit digital portfolios of Chinese students' academic work.

In the West, the issue is likely to be addressed more forcefully when Chinese students continue to arrive unprepared for education in English. As valuable as full-tuition-paying Chinese students might be to universities that need the money, that would be offset by the price of having them drop out later. "The cost of not being able to keep that student, is tremendous," Dr. Bridges said. "The incentive, the motivator that might change this, is retention and attrition."

That loss of face could alter the behavior of Chinese secondary schools, whose students leave to study in the West but then return without degrees—or that are caught falsifying grades and transcripts. Dr. Bridges said she no longer accepts applications from the school whose headmaster told her he would do anything it took to get his students into Western universities.

"If these students that have been pushed into this by some eager principal, some eager agent, some eager parent, and then goes home having failed, at that point [the Chinese] will see this is a long-term problem," she said.

Back in Nanjing, Mr. Yizhou's classmate, Zhu Yi, is hoping to go to Boston University in the United States. He, too, knows that other Chinese cheat, he said. "Frankly, it's true. But not everybody does that," Mr. Yi said. "Most people do those things in the right way."