

The Cost of Unregulated Consultant

The recent detention of three individuals in Islamabad following a young graduate's suicide should disturb anyone who knows how families drain their savings for a child's overseas education. As reported, the primary suspect allegedly demanded Rs. 9.3m from the 23-year-old's family for a US visa and scholarship. The family reportedly paid Rs. 2.1m in cash and transferred Rs. 2.9m into a bank account. When endless financial demands persisted, the crushing pressure overwhelmed the student. Local police filed charges under Sections 322 and 34 of the Pakistan Penal Code, while the FIA opened a second case based on her uncle's complaint, citing multiple PPC and Emigration Ordinance sections. Police believe this group scammed several others, hoarding hundreds of millions of rupees.

While a court must still evaluate these accusations, the devastating human toll remains undeniable. Sadly, this is not an isolated heartbreak. This past July, the FIA apprehended a Sialkot man operating as Broadway Consultancy, who allegedly guaranteed students placement at the University of Nevada, Reno, alongside HEC-funded PhD scholarships. He allegedly extorted \$10,000 per victim, distributing paperwork bearing the HEC's name that the commission eventually identified as completely fabricated. Though differing slightly in specifics, both incidents share a familiar blueprint: a young person's dreams, a charismatic middleman, and highly convincing forged documents.

The underlying issue is an entirely unregulated market. Facilitating international study is now a booming business, where anyone with a leased workspace and a slick online profile can masquerade as an advisor. For first-generation students, distinguishing legitimate agencies from scams is nearly impossible. The forged Sialkot documents utilizing the HEC's title speaks volumes; the commission's own credibility is actively being counterfeited.



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Instead of enacting sweeping new legislation immediately, the priority must be a straightforward, accessible public resource. The HEC ought to launch a free, open digital portal detailing verified overseas educational consultants, complete with their official registration numbers, physical locations, and license expiration dates. This database should prominently feature blacklisted or suspended agents, enable users to verify admission or scholarship letters via a QR code or unique reference number, and integrate a direct complaint pipeline to the FIA. Accessible via mobile devices in both English and Urdu, this platform would empower families to verify an agent's legitimacy before handing over a single rupee.

However, this portal cannot function in isolation. Any registry relies entirely on the integrity of its backend processes, requiring strict background checks, transparent audit trails, and severe penalties for officials who compromise the system. Formal registration must become a strict legal obligation, ensuring that unlisted operators are explicitly committing a crime. Furthermore, universities must proactively advise applicants to verify all offers directly with the academic institution. Financial institutions and the FIA's cybercrime division must also monitor frequent, massive cash transfers directed at these self-proclaimed consulting firms.

Tragically, the victims are frequently the brightest students—those who rightfully earned scholarships and envisioned a better academic future. The fact that they are pushed to absolute despair by exploiters peddling false hope represents a profound failure of both regulatory oversight and basic human conscience. While arrests are absolutely necessary, they alone will not solve the crisis. A centralized public registry requires minimal investment compared to the devastating financial ruin these families endure. The government must prioritize and construct it immediately.