# THE COMMODIFICATION OF ACADEMIC CREDENTIALS AND THE DEGRADATION OF INTEGRITY IN INDONESIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

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## Abstract

This study aims to analyze the phenomenon of degree purchasing in the education system and its impact on the integrity and credibility of education. Additionally, it identifies the factors driving this practice using Derrida's post-structuralism theory framework. The research employs the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method to collect and synthesize findings from empirical studies related to academic degree purchasing, published between 2017 and 2024. Keywords used in the search include "degree purchasing," "impact of degree purchasing," "academic integrity," "educational accreditation," "fake degrees," and "education quality." The study selection process follows PRISMA guidelines to ensure transparency and reproducibility. Thematic analysis was conducted to identify trends, patterns, and gaps in the existing literature. The findings reveal that the practice of degree purchasing has significant negative impacts on the education system, including a decline in academic integrity, reinforcement of unjust power structures, and loss of public trust in educational institutions. The main factors driving this practice include social and economic pressures, regulatory weaknesses, supportive cultural norms, high demand for educational qualifications, and advances in information technology. Analysis using Derrida's post- structuralism theory highlights how the dynamics of meaning and power structures interact in shaping this phenomenon, indicating that academic degrees have become status symbols that can be commodified and manipulated to meet social and economic needs.

**Keywords:** Degree purchasing, Education, Academic integrity, Educational credibility

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The education system is the primary foundation for building an educated and cultured society. Education plays an important role in creating individuals who possess the knowledge, skills, and moral values necessary to face global challenges. In many countries, education is not only viewed as a human right but also as an instrument for improving social and economic welfare. In this context, educational degrees become symbols that signify an individual's success in completing the learning process. However, education systems in various parts of the world face serious challenges that can undermine their credibility. One of these challenges is the increasingly widespread phenomenon of degree purchasing in several regions. This phenomenon poses a threat to educational integrity and gives rise to social inequality. Therefore, it is important to understand the impacts generated by this practice within the context of the global education system.

The phenomenon of degree purchasing is not a new issue, but it has received increasing attention over the past few decades. Degree purchasing generally involves

individuals or organizations that provide academic degrees without undergoing legitimate formal education processes. This practice can be carried out through fake educational institutions or fraudulent activities conducted under the name of recognized educational institutions. This phenomenon is often driven by the high demand for educational degrees for employment purposes or social status. As a result, degrees obtained through such illegal means do not reflect the competence or knowledge that degree holders are supposed to possess. This phenomenon affects not only the individuals involved but also the education system as a whole. Consequently, public trust in academic degrees and educational institutions may decline.

One of the main causes of the degree purchasing phenomenon is the high social and economic pressure to possess educational degrees. Educational degrees are often regarded as the primary requirement for obtaining prestigious jobs or career promotion. In many countries, academic degrees are also used as symbols of social status that reflect achievement and public recognition. This pressure encourages some individuals to seek shortcuts in obtaining educational degrees without having to go through genuine learning processes. In addition, disparities in access to education also serve as a driving factor, where individuals who are unable to pursue formal education choose to purchase degrees as an alternative. This phenomenon reflects fundamental problems within the education system that has not yet become fully inclusive and equitable.

Degree purchasing has serious impacts on the quality of education systems at both national and international levels. This practice damages educational integrity by blurring the boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate degrees. Educational institutions involved in the sale of degrees also tarnish the reputation of educational institutions as a whole. This situation causes society to lose trust in academic degrees as symbols of competence and knowledge. Furthermore, degree purchasing creates injustice for individuals who have worked hard to complete their education through legitimate means. When degrees can be obtained illegally, the value of legitimate effort and achievement becomes degraded. This condition can generate frustration among students and educators.

Another negative impact of degree purchasing occurs in the labor market. Academic degrees that are supposed to serve as indicators of professional ability and competence can no longer be fully relied upon. Many companies eventually question the credibility of degrees held by job applicants, especially when this phenomenon has become widespread in a particular region. As a result, recruitment processes become more complex because companies must seek ways to verify the authenticity of candidates' degrees. This situation can also affect organizational productivity, as employees whose abilities do not match their degrees may be unable to perform their duties effectively. This phenomenon also creates inequality in the labor market, where

individuals who obtain degrees illegally can take job opportunities from those who possess genuine competence.

The phenomenon of degree purchasing also has broader implications for society, particularly in terms of trust in education. Education, which should serve as a fundamental pillar of societal development, loses its meaning when the value of academic degrees is no longer respected. In the long term, society may lose trust in the education system, which ultimately reduces motivation to pursue legitimate education. In addition, degree purchasing exacerbates social inequality by providing opportunities for individuals with economic power to obtain degrees without effort, while less advantaged individuals must struggle to achieve the same level of education. This situation creates an increasingly deep divide between different social groups.

On the other hand, degree purchasing also reflects weaknesses in regulation within the education system. Many countries do not yet have sufficiently strong mechanisms to supervise and prevent this practice. Fake educational institutions or "diploma mills" often operate without adequate oversight, allowing them to easily offer fake degrees to the public. This lack of regulation worsens the problem because there are no firm sanctions for individuals or institutions involved in this practice. Therefore, joint efforts from governments, educational institutions, and society are required to strengthen supervision and enforce laws related to degree purchasing. This is essential to maintain the credibility of the education system and to protect academic values.

Considering the impacts generated, the phenomenon of degree purchasing requires serious attention from various stakeholders. The education system must be able to address this challenge by creating more transparent and accountable mechanisms in the awarding of academic degrees. In addition, efforts to raise public awareness about the importance of integrity in education must also be undertaken. By restoring the original value and meaning of educational degrees, it is expected that public trust in the education system can be restored. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the impact of the degree purchasing phenomenon within the global education system in order to provide deeper insights into this issue and to seek effective solutions to address it.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This study employs the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method with the objective of drawing conclusions from various research findings related to the impact of the degree purchasing phenomenon within the global education system. The SLR method was selected due to its ability to systematically collect, evaluate, and synthesize findings from a range of relevant empirical studies. Through this approach, the study is able to provide a comprehensive overview of the issue under investigation. The primary focus of this SLR is to identify trends, patterns, and gaps in the existing

literature over the last ten years, namely from 2017 to 2024. The study selection process was conducted in accordance with the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines to ensure transparency and reproducibility of the research (Hendrik, 2023). In addition, this study also assesses the methodological quality of each study included in the review. Through this approach, the research is expected to produce valid and evidence-based conclusions.
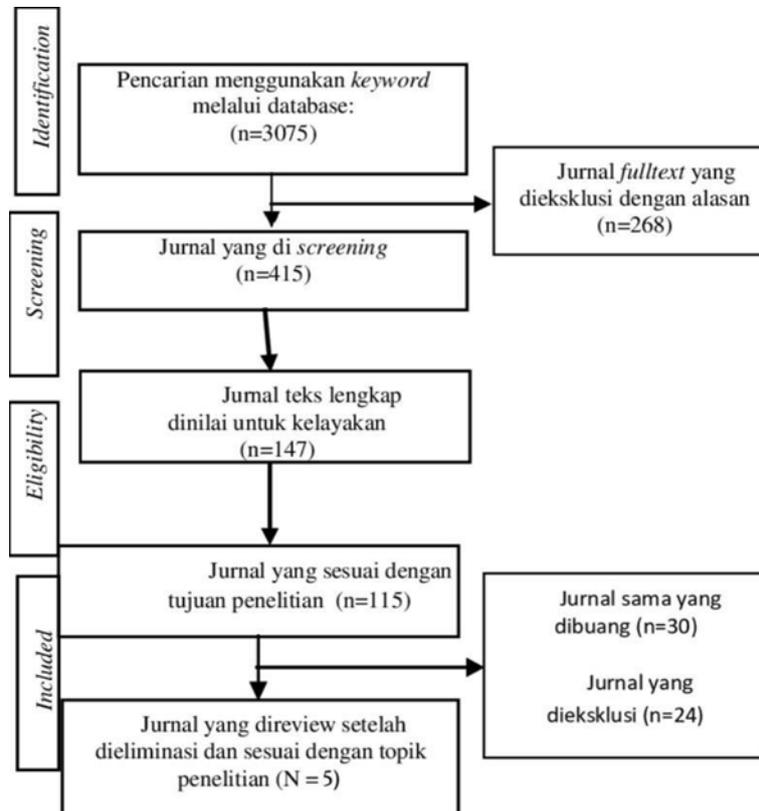
The studies included in this SLR are empirical studies published between 2017 and 2024. The inclusion criteria encompass studies that explicitly discuss the phenomenon of degree purchasing and its impacts, whether from individual, institutional, or societal perspectives. The selected studies are required to employ quantitative or qualitative research methods that have been verified and recognized by the academic community. Studies that do not meet these criteria, such as conceptual papers or literature reviews, were excluded from the selection process. Furthermore, only studies published in Indonesian and English were included in this SLR to ensure broad and relevant literature coverage. The initial screening process was conducted by reviewing titles and abstracts, followed by a full-text review of eligible articles to ensure their relevance and quality. This process ensures that only the most relevant and high-quality studies are included in the subsequent analysis.

The search terms used in this study consist of combinations of terms related to the phenomenon of degree purchasing and its impacts within the educational context. The primary keywords used include "degree purchasing," "impact of degree purchasing," "academic integrity," "educational accreditation," "fake degrees," and "education quality." English variations such as "degree buying," "impact of degree purchasing," "academic integrity," "education accreditation," "fake degrees," and "education quality" were also used to broaden the scope of the search. The search was conducted through academic databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus, and PubMed, using Boolean operators to combine relevant keywords. All search results were subsequently screened based on the predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. This process ensures that only the most relevant and high-quality studies are included in the subsequent analysis, thereby enhancing the validity and reliability of the research findings.

The data obtained from this SLR were analyzed thematically to identify the main themes and patterns emerging from the reviewed studies. This analysis involved categorizing research findings based on topics, methodologies, and results relevant to the research objectives. In addition, the researcher assessed the methodological quality of each reviewed study to ensure the validity and reliability of the conclusions drawn. Data synthesis was conducted by integrating similar findings and comparing differing results to obtain a deeper understanding of the impacts of the degree purchasing phenomenon. Thus, this study is able to provide comprehensive and integrated insights based on existing empirical evidence. The results of this analysis

are expected to provide a strong foundation for the development of theory and practice in the field of education, as well as to offer recommendations for future research.

**Figure 1**



Identification: Pencarian menggunakan *keyword* melalui database: (n=3075)

Jurnal *fulltext* yang dieksklusi dengan alasan (n=268)

Screening: Jurnal yang di *screening* (n=415)

Eligibility: Jurnal teks lengkap dinilai untuk kelayakan (n=147)

Included: Jurnal yang sesuai dengan tujuan penelitian (n=115)

Jurnal sama yang dibuang (n=30)

Jurnal yang dieksklusi (n=24)

Jurnal yang direview setelah dieliminasi dan sesuai dengan topik penelitian (N = 5)

## 3.   FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

## Table 1

Literature Review Results

| Title/Author | Authors | Research Objectives | Research Type | Results |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Critical Perspective on Academic Culture in Higher Education: Azyumardi Azra's Perspective *Aziz, A. A. A. A., Syarifah, A., Dewi, D. R., Habibulloh, H., Abrori, A., & Ubaidillah, A. (2023).* | Aziz et al. (2023) | To explore Azyumardi Azra's thoughts regarding critical academic culture in higher education in Indonesia, focusing on the intellectual independence of academics and students. | Qualitative Literature Research | Found that the lack of intellectual independence among academics and students is a major criticism. Academic culture dominated by passive learning and memorization hinders students' ability to think critically and independently, which can contribute to negative phenomena such as lack of academic integrity, although it does not directly discuss the practice of degree purchasing. |
| Juridical Analysis of Criminal Acts of Granting Academic Degrees Without Rights (Case Study of Decision Number | Tahulending (2024) | To analyze legal provisions regarding the granting of academic | Juridical Research | Found that granting academic degrees without rights is considered an |

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|---|---|---|---|---|
| Juridical Analysis of Criminal Acts of Granting Academic Degrees Without Rights (Case Study of Decision Number 45/PID.SUS/2022/PN MGN) *Tahulending, C. E. P. (2024).* | Tahulending (2024) | To analyze legal provisions regarding the granting of academic degrees without rights and the judge's considerations in the case. | Juridical Research | Found that granting academic degrees without rights is considered an administrative violation, not a criminal act, so its resolution is through state administrative legal procedures. Although it does not explicitly discuss degree purchasing, this finding is relevant because the practice of buying and selling degrees can be included in granting degrees without rights. |
| Strategic Management of Academic Culture Development in State Islamic Religious Higher Education Institutions in the Digital Era *Dina, S., Phangesti, D. S., & Hafizh, M. (2023).* | Dina et al. (2023) | To explore strategies for developing academic culture in PTKIN in the digital era, as well as identifying factors causing the decline of academic culture. | Qualitative Research (Literature Review) | Identified negative practices such as plagiarism, lack of reading and research culture, sexual harassment, and diploma forgery including the buying and selling of degrees. Emphasized the need for effective management, |

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|---|---|---|---|---|
| Administrative Law Efforts Regarding the Controversy of Granting Academic Honorary Degrees *Efendi, V. D., & Yossyafaat, H. (2024).* | Efendi & Yossyafaat (2024) | To analyze the rector's decision in granting academic honorary degrees from the perspective of state administrative law and legal remedies for the resulting controversy. | Normative Juridical Legal Research | Concluded that granting academic honorary degrees includes State Administrative Decisions and is under the absolute authority of PTUN. If disputes arise, they can be resolved through administrative or litigation efforts. This practice is relevant to degree purchasing because illegitimate rector's decisions may involve granting degrees without rights, similar to illegal buying and selling of academic degrees. |
| The Practice of Buying and Selling Diplomas in the Perspective of Islamic Law: The Practice of Selling and Purchasing Degrees in The Perspective of Islamic Law *Syaripudin, A., Herman, S., & Irfansyah, I. (2024).* | Syaripudin et al. (2024) | To understand the practice of buying and selling diplomas from the perspective of Islamic law, including legal views, Islamic business analysis, and its consequences. | Library Research | Concluded that the practice of buying and selling diplomas is a crime and criminal act according to Islamic law and Indonesian national law (Article 263 of the Criminal Code and Law No. 20 of 2003). Diplomas are considered documents that grant rights to academic degrees, so buying and selling diplomas is an illegitimate practice and violates Islamic business ethics. This directly links the practice of degree purchasing with legal and ethical implications. |

The phenomenon of degree purchasing in education brings broad and complex impacts on various aspects of the educational system. First, this phenomenon changes society's perception of the value and meaning of academic degrees. Degrees that should reflect academic achievement and individual competence are now also viewed as symbols of social status that can be obtained through financial transactions. This creates ambiguity in assessing educational quality, as degrees obtained without

legitimate learning processes no longer reflect actual effort and knowledge (Icshan, 2022). This change blurs the boundaries between authentic and inauthentic achievements, thereby reducing public trust in educational institutions. Moreover, illegitimately obtained degrees also raise doubts about the integrity of degree holders in professional and academic environments. Consequently, the intrinsic value of academic degrees as indicators of competence decreases, negatively impacting general perceptions of formal education.

Beyond changing the meaning of academic degrees, degree purchasing also reinforces existing power structures in the educational system. Academic degrees, as symbols of formal recognition, become tools to maintain or even enhance an individual's social and economic position. Individuals or groups with greater financial resources have easier access to obtaining degrees without having to go through legitimate educational processes. This creates inequality in the distribution of academic degrees, where degrees are no longer based on competence or achievement, but on financial capability (Lay, 2024). This power structure reinforces existing social hierarchies, where status symbols such as academic degrees can be utilized to maintain dominant positions in society. Moreover, this inequality also widens the gap between those who can buy degrees and those who work hard through formal channels, thus exacerbating injustice in the educational system.

Another negative impact is the decline in reputation of educational institutions involved in degree purchasing practices. Educational institutions known to facilitate or unable to prevent this practice face declining trust from society and prospective students. This damaged reputation not only affects the institution itself but also impacts graduates who have actually completed their education legitimately (Efendi, 2024). Degrees from institutions with declining reputations are no longer valued equally with degrees from institutions with good reputations. This causes graduates from these institutions to have difficulty finding jobs or obtaining appropriate professional recognition. Additionally, the reputation of educational institutions as a whole can also be threatened, as degree purchasing practices are considered to reflect the institution's inability to maintain high academic standards. Therefore, this reputational impact becomes an important factor that reinforces the damage to the integrity of the educational system.

The degree purchasing phenomenon also impacts the internal dynamics of educational institutions, especially in the relationship between students and lecturers. When degrees can be obtained without going through legitimate educational processes, students lose motivation to actively participate in the learning process. This creates a passive academic culture and reduces student participation in intellectual activities that should develop critical and analytical thinking abilities (Jalaludin, 2024). Moreover, interactions between students and lecturers become less meaningful, as students' main focus is no longer on academic achievement but on quickly acquiring degrees. Consequently, educational quality declines because the effective teaching

and learning process does not run properly. This less authentic relationship also reduces the sense of responsibility and academic ethics among students. Thus, the degree purchasing phenomenon negatively impacts educational quality and students' intellectual development.

Furthermore, degree purchasing affects labor market dynamics and employers' perceptions of academic degrees. Academic degrees that should be indicators of competence and professional expertise have become less reliable. Many companies face difficulties in assessing candidates' qualifications due to the risk that possessed degrees may have been obtained through illegitimate means. This causes employers to have to conduct further verification of degree authenticity, which can increase costs and time in the recruitment process. Moreover, organizational productivity can be affected, as individuals who do not have appropriate competencies may not be able to perform tasks well, despite having academic degrees. Consequently, this phenomenon creates injustice in the workplace, where individuals who buy degrees get opportunities that should be obtained by those with actual competencies. Thus, the labor market becomes less efficient and fair, and decreases overall organizational productivity.

The degree purchasing phenomenon also has profound ethical and moral implications in society. This practice contradicts the principles of academic integrity and educational ethics, which emphasize the importance of honesty, responsibility, and legitimate achievement. Degree purchasing creates an environment where these values are ignored for personal or group gain. This not only damages the reputation of individuals involved but also lowers moral and ethical standards in the educational system. Moreover, this practice can influence future generations, as students see that degrees can be obtained in illegitimate and unethical ways, reducing their sense of responsibility toward academic integrity. Thus, the degree purchasing phenomenon weakens the ethical and moral foundation in education, which should shape positive character and values in individuals. These ethical implications raise an urgent need to strengthen integrity and honesty values in the educational system to prevent the spread of these unethical practices.

The long-term impacts of the degree purchasing phenomenon include declining educational quality and loss of public trust in the educational system. If this practice continues, educational institutions will find it increasingly difficult to maintain high academic standards, as issued degrees no longer reflect legitimate achievements. Public trust in the educational system declines, which can result in decreased participation and public support for formal education. Moreover, declining educational quality impacts the country's ability to produce competent and innovative workforce, which is essential for economic and social development. Degree purchasing can cause stagnation in the development of science and technology, as educational institutions are no longer able to produce quality graduates who contribute significantly in their fields of expertise.

Factors Contributing to Degree Purchasing Practices in Education

The practice of degree purchasing in education is influenced by various interrelated factors that form complex dynamics in the educational system. One of the main factors is the high social and economic pressure to have academic degrees. In modern society, educational degrees are often considered the primary requirement for obtaining good jobs and improving social status. This pressure drives individuals to seek quick and easy ways to obtain degrees without having to go through long and challenging educational processes. According to Derrida, the meaning of degrees is never fixed but is always influenced by social and economic contexts, so this pressure creates space for degree purchasing practices. In this case, degrees become flexible symbols that can be traded according to changing social and economic needs. Therefore, social and economic pressure becomes the main catalyst in the emergence of degree purchasing practices.

Economic factors also play an important role in degree purchasing practices. High educational costs and limited financial access often become barriers for individuals to complete formal education. To overcome these barriers, some individuals choose to buy degrees as a more affordable and quick alternative. Derrida's concept of différance explains that the meaning of degrees is always in a process of difference and deferral, so degrees obtained through financial transactions no longer reflect legitimate intellectual achievements. Moreover, the existence of educational institutions offering degrees at relatively low costs or without strict academic requirements attracts the interest of those seeking instant solutions. This phenomenon shows how economic structures can influence the perception and value of academic degrees, making them easier to manipulate and trade. Consequently, overall educational quality can decline because obtained degrees do not reflect actual competence. Thus, economic factors reinforce degree purchasing practices through their influence on the meaning and value of academic degrees.

Weaknesses in regulation and oversight are also significant factors that allow degree purchasing practices to develop. Many countries or educational institutions do not yet have mechanisms strong enough to detect and prevent this practice (Aziz, 2023). Lack of effective oversight allows fake or unaccredited educational institutions to offer degrees illegally. Derrida's deconstruction helps us understand that weak power structures and regulations create gaps that can be exploited to dismantle the traditional meaning structure of academic degrees. Without strict regulations, the meaning of academic degrees can be manipulated, so illegitimate degrees can be accepted socially and professionally. Moreover, lax degree verification processes in many work institutions make it easier for individuals to obtain positions that should be obtained through formal education. This regulatory ineffectiveness creates an environment conducive to degree purchasing practices, exacerbating the problem of academic integrity in the educational system.

Cultural factors also contribute to degree purchasing practices in the educational system. In some societies, there is a culture that emphasizes the importance of academic degrees as symbols of achievement and success. This culture drives individuals to pursue degrees without considering the process that must be undertaken to obtain them. Derrida's concept of trace explains that every symbol, including academic degrees, carries traces of the cultural structures and norms that shape them. A culture that highly values degrees without paying attention to legitimate educational processes creates an environment where degrees can be traded as symbols of social status. Moreover, the stigma against academic failure makes individuals reluctant to acknowledge their inability, so they prefer to buy degrees rather than face failure. This cultural factor reinforces the desire to have degrees as tools to gain social recognition, even if it means violating academic ethics. Thus, cultural norms and values that highly value degrees without paying attention to legitimate educational processes play an important role in degree purchasing practices.

High demand for educational degrees is also a major factor driving degree purchasing practices. In the era of globalization, competition in the workplace is increasingly tight, and educational degrees become one of the main criteria used by employers to assess candidates. This demand creates additional pressure for individuals to have degrees, which often drives them to seek alternative ways to achieve them (Syaripudin, 2024). Derrida's idea of différance emphasizes that the meaning of degrees is always moving and never reaches definitive resolution, so this high demand creates space for manipulation of degree meaning. Moreover, the existence of global trends that assess high degrees as indicators of personal and professional success reinforces this demand. This condition creates a fertile market for degree purchasing practices, as individuals feel that having degrees is the key to getting better opportunities in the labor market. Therefore, high demand for educational degrees plays an important role in driving degree purchasing practices, as degrees become highly valued and desired symbols in society.

Information technology also contributes to the ease of degree purchasing practices. With technological advances, access to online educational institutions and online courses is increasingly easy and affordable. Although many legitimate and accredited online educational institutions exist, there are also unofficial ones offering degrees without strict academic requirements. Derrida's deconstruction helps us understand that information technology can be used to dismantle and manipulate the traditional meaning structure of academic degrees, thus allowing illegitimate degrees to spread widely. Technology enables rapid and widespread dissemination of information, so fake educational institutions can easily reach potential prospective students. Moreover, the anonymity of online transactions makes it difficult to track and identify these illegal practices. This ease of access accelerates the spread of degree purchasing practices, making them more prevalent in the educational system. Therefore, information technology development not accompanied by strict oversight

can exacerbate the degree purchasing problem, as technology is used as a tool to deconstruct and manipulate the meaning of academic degrees.

## 4. CONCLUSION

The phenomenon of degree purchasing in education has broad and profound impacts on the integrity and credibility of the educational system. Degree purchasing changes society's perception of the value and meaning of academic degrees, where degrees that should reflect academic achievement and individual competence are now also viewed as symbols of social status that can be obtained through financial transactions. This creates ambiguity in assessing educational quality, as degrees obtained without legitimate learning processes no longer reflect actual effort and knowledge. This impact not only reduces public trust in educational institutions but also decreases students' motivation to pursue authentic and high-quality formal education.

Furthermore, the practice of degree purchasing reinforces existing power structures and social hierarchies in the educational system. Individuals or groups with greater financial resources have easier access to obtaining degrees without having to go through legitimate educational processes, thus creating inequality in the distribution of academic degrees. This power structure reinforces social hierarchies, where status symbols such as academic degrees can be utilized to maintain or even enhance dominant positions in society. This inequality also widens the gap between those who can buy degrees and those who work hard through formal channels, thus exacerbating injustice in the educational system. Moreover, weaknesses in regulation and oversight allow degree purchasing practices to develop, worsening problems of academic integrity and the reputation of educational institutions.

Degree purchasing can be understood as a result of the dynamics of meaning and power structures that interact with each other in society. Derrida's deconstruction reveals that the meaning of academic degrees is not fixed and is always influenced by existing social, economic, and ideological contexts. The practice of degree purchasing reflects how academic symbols can be manipulated to maintain or strengthen social hierarchies, and how the meaning of degrees continues to move and change along with changes in power structures

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