

Sussex degree factory sells PhDs for £155

THE SALE of spurious educational degrees by self-styled colleges and universities has become a flourishing trade in Britain. But the Government admitted last week that it cannot think of a way to do anything about it. Mrs Margaret Thatcher, the Education Secretary, told the Commons that legislation would present "difficulties."

Yet there is disturbing evidence that the "degree mills," which until recently thrived mainly in America, have become a multi-million pound business in Britain. And it is an international business, for one of the chief selling-points of an impressive-looking certificate from a British institution is that it can be used by inscrupulous job-seekers round the world.

At home, the customers appear to be victims of vanity or simple gullibility. The number holding these degrees possibly runs into thousands. Analysis of last year's census returns has been throwing up so many suspect BAs, PhDs and other degrees that a special category for them has had to be added to the census computer programme.

The degree mills sometimes charge as little as £28 and a PhD for £100. For £100, one enterprising college will bestow the title of Professor Emeritus. The scale of charges at Britain's leading degree mill, the "Sussex College of Technology," is a little higher: BA £30, MA £98, doctorate £120, PhD £155. There is also an "honorary degree" for £100.

The Sussex College of Technology is a thriving example of

this type of educational enterprise. It is one of four businesses run by 48-year-old "Prof" Bruce Copen, "PhD, DLitt, FBRA," from a 20-roomed Victorian mansion set in spacious grounds at Dane Hill, Haywards Heath, Sussex.

Copen's rise from ex-corporal (he was a wartime entertainments officer with ENSA) to director of a string of enterprises selling "education" all over the world makes an intriguing story.

He began humbly after the war, giving highly unorthodox treatment in "homeopathy" and "radiesthesia." Then he started his first correspondence school in a converted caravan next to a chicken run at Great Missenden, Bucks, in 1957. The "Universal Correspondence School" offered courses in massage, dietetics and physical culture. Courses in "elementary radiesthesia" cost three guineas, "iris diagnosis" studies cost six guineas, and "colour therapy" lessons nine guineas.

Copen had clearly tapped a rich vein. By 1961 he was able to move to a £15,000 stone cottage at Balcombe, Sussex. There he registered Brantridge Forest School for "disseminating information to adults . . . in the natural sciences, healing, etc." By June, 1969, he had progressed to his present much larger premises near Haywards Heath and had launched the Sussex College of Technology.

The college offers far more than his original courses in home-spun medicine. For £74, Copen offers a degree in economics—"one of the most complete and fully detailed Courses on the subject available anywhere . . . complete within 15 Lessons."

Another 15-lesson course offers a complete guide to the development of the English language, "the gamut of English literature" through the ages, plus tips on grammar, spelling, punctuation and public speaking, all for £34.

There are also courses ranging from philosophy and education to domestic science and computer technology. At the end of each



course the student is offered a certificate in Latin, "suitable for framing." The certificate's value, however, is somewhat marred by several grammatical errors. Copen also has trouble with Latin in his outline of courses: he repeatedly speaks of "this curricula."

Radiesthesia is apparently a word of Copen's inventing. He defines it as "the science of pendulum detection."

Copen does not list any teaching staff in his "curricula," but he does name a "Board of Regents" including V. Navaratnam, a Singapore teacher; Lee Ah Bah, a Malaysian headmaster; Ngai Luen You, "representative of Xus College in Hong Kong, and Edward O. Oduwusi, a Lagos medical technician, "Professor of Studies for this college in Nigeria."

Soon after Copen's college opened, East Sussex education department began receiving letters from all over the world inquiring about it. The University of Sussex began keeping a dossier on this strange rival. All inquirers—among them potential students, educational institutions and company personnel managers—are told by both the county and the university that the degrees are spurious.

In a standard letter to prospective students, Copen admits: "The degree awards offered are not 'recognised' by the educational authorities in the UK." He even adds that the use of degrees "may be restricted to non-academic activities." Despite repeated phone calls to the college last week, Copen could not be reached for comment, and his staff refused to discuss their work.

ALTHOUGH the Government has not found a way to suppress the degree mills, it is aware that they can reflect harmfully on Britain's educational reputation abroad.

● In Oakland County, Michigan, a man calling himself a Professor of Philosophy from the School of Applied Sciences was put in charge of a group of guidance clinics with responsibility for psychologically disturbed children. Only recently discovered that his "school" was a degree mill. He was demoted, and took a salary cut.

● In nearby Marlette, Michigan, a Methodist minister for seven years as "Doctor of Divinity"—a degree from International Free Protestant Episcopal University, Tottenham, London.

● The Sierra Leone government is belatedly investigating credentials of one of its Washington embassy staff was appointed to a £5,000 post on the basis of an honorary degree from a British degree mill.

Sierra Leone is trying to curb the activities of degree sellers and their local agents have found rich pickings in Africa—and in ex-colonies generally, where the thirst for qualifications is great and the standards of institutions are few.

Victims of British degree mills appear regularly in African courts, charged with improper use of titles and degrees. Prosecution often calls on William Dey, secretary of London University's external requirements department, for evidence on the invalidity of qualifications.

As long ago as 1963, the Robbins Committee on Higher Education recommended legislation to restrict the power to award degrees to authorised bodies. But nothing was done, and the industry has now grown larger.

Mrs Thatcher's Commons speech last Thursday rules out any prospect of quick legislation. But if the Government finds some way of clamping down, many thousands of people in Britain and abroad will continue to be tempted or fooled into buying quite meaningless qualifications.