

► Jeremy Au Yong & Jean Loo

THAT straight-A university undergraduate helping your child with his homework may not actually be as qualified as you think.

With no formal checks in place, many tutors are getting away with lying about their resumes, turning Cs into As, polytechnic courses into university degrees and plucking teaching experience out of thin air.

And some tuition agents are encouraging them to do so.

"It's easy to get away with lying," said National University of Singapore (NUS) undergraduate Stephanie Luo, 21. "I've never been asked to produce my certificate."

The former Anglo-Chinese Junior College student had a B average, but got two tutoring jobs by passing herself off as a straight-A Hwa Chong student.

While tuition centres and their teachers have to be registered with the Ministry of Education (MOE), individual tutors do not need to be, nor do agents who find jobs for tutors.

In some cases, it is the agents who propose the charade.

Ms Amanda Hobday, 22, a third-year business student at the Singapore Institute of Management, was advised by her agent to lie about her teaching experience. The agent was one of many she had called and she could not remember who it was.

She told The Sunday Times: "I was teaching only one student and juggling school. But the agent told me to tell parents I was a full-time tutor with many students."

On another occasion, she was asked to inflate her age by two years.

"Even before I asked why I had to lie, the agent went on about how parents have many requirements, like the tutor must be an NUS student of a certain age and with good grades."

With the demand for tuition growing, the

Do you know your child's tutor may have duped you?

Agents don't ask tutors for credentials, and some even get them to lie to parents

problem has only become worse. In 2004, the Consumers Association of Singapore (Case) received only two complaints against private tutors. Last year, that number shot up to 14. However, as Case handles only complaints against companies, it was forced to turn away the complainants.

Some 1,200 private schools are currently registered with the MOE, most of them tuition centres. Tutors estimate that for every registered teacher, there are two fly-by-night ones.

Hardly surprising, considering how easy it is to set up as a tutor or an agent.

"For the agent, all you need is a phone number and a small ad in the paper," said Mr Lai Wei Chang who handles the marketing for tuition centre manytutors.com. "There is nearly no start-up capital."

Every day the newspapers carry several thumbnail-size ads offering tuition or recruiting teachers. Most of these ads do not even have the name of a company, just someone's name and a phone number. School-leavers awaiting their O- or A-level results often find students through these channels.

According to Mr Lai, tuition agents can make up to seven tutor-student matches a day at the start of the school year. The agents take in roughly \$100 for each successful match, a 50 per cent cut of the tutor's fees for the first month.

And since there is no long-term commitment to the parent or tutor, many agents are more than happy to cut corners.

Of 25 tuition agent ads The Sunday Times responded to, not one requested academic certificates for verification.

When contacted a second time and asked why they did not bother to do any checks, they said they trusted the tutors and left the checking to the parents.

Said one, a Madam Liaw, 54, who refused to

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