Southern California degrees

Machine-made grades fraud?*Los Angeles*

A CASE of possible computer chicanery is under investigation at the University of Southern California (USC) in Los Angeles.

According to university officials, at least 30 students may have paid thousands of dollars to have their grades changed on transcripts stored in the campus computer system. The higher grades may have enabled some students to gain admission to law school, medical school and graduate school. In some instances, the grade changes meant students could have graduated without repeating failed courses.

Now there is another allegation from United States drug enforcement officers that entirely bogus USC degrees have been sold for up to \$25,000 each.

The university is investigating both charges, according to vice-provost Sylvia Manning. "We take this enormously seriously. We have been embezzled, not for money but for grades and perhaps for degrees", she said. "The degree stands for the knowledge and skill that the university is offering its students."

Two investigations are under way simultaneously. The most recent stems from the arrest last September of a former USC student, Merhdad Amini, who arrived in Louisville, Kentucky, with two kilograms of cocaine in his luggage. Mr Amini, a 27-year old Iranian citizen, is under indictment in Louisville for possessing and intending to distribute the drug. He told a *Los Angeles Times* reporter that he was "set up" by someone who claimed to be his friend.

Drug enforcement officials in Louisville said they learned during the course of the drug investigation that phony USC degrees were being sold.

University officials are now painstakingly comparing transcripts kept in the central computer with duplicate transcripts filed in the various university departments; any discrepancies should eventually be found.

If evidence of tampering is found, the information will be turned over to the Los Angeles county district attorney's office, which is looking into the question of bogus degrees.

A second investigation charging that students have bought higher grades has been under way since last October. Thirty students, whose records were changed "in an unauthorized manner", are due to appear before a university conduct review board later this month. Penalties for those found guilty could range from a reprimand to expulsion from the university or criminal charges of "malicious access to a computer".

USC sources who asked for anonymity said the university's probe is focused on a group of foreign students suspected of selling both the grades and the fake

degrees. The group reportedly paid employees in the university's records and registration office for computer passwords. A gang member would then alter the grades on a transcript or alter a completed transcript by electronically erasing the name of the legitimate student and entering the name of a customer who paid for a bogus degree. In some instances, the sources said, university employees may have done the tampering in exchange for cocaine or money. The investigation has not so far named any suspects. **Sandra Blakeslee**

Research councils

Sterling worries

LAST year's Christmas bonus to the British research councils seems to have disappeared before the ink on the cheques has dried, partly because of the decline of the value of sterling on the international exchanges. Three years from now, according to estimates now current, the Science and Engineering Research Council (SERC) will have to find an extra £8 million to help pay for its overseas subscriptions to organizations such as the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN) in Geneva as well as for its own installations overseas, notably the telescopes on Hawaii and La Palma. This will almost exactly cancel out the extra funds won last December.

The history of research council wrangling with the British government over the cost of overseas activities is now rich and lengthening. Three years ago, an unwonted increase in the value of sterling against other currencies allowed SERC to distribute the windfall as an extra capital grant, to the chagrin of the Treasury.

Two years ago, with sterling fallen somewhat, the Treasury agreed that there should be a special investigation of the research councils' extra need for cash. The outcome was a settlement that partially compensated the research council for that year's sterling fall.

The fall of sterling in the past six months, which has been more dramatic, has created a novel set of circumstances. At its meeting last week, the Advisory Board for the Research Councils agreed to draw the government's attention to the problem. In the current year, SERC is having to find £2.4 million out of its budget to pay for the extra costs not covered by the earlier review as well as the larger sum occasioned by the fall of sterling.

Other research councils are not nearly as much affected by currency fluctuations, but have discovered special problems of their own. Thus the Agricultural and Food Research Council is now worrying about the threat that research commissions will tail off during the course of the next three years. □

Hungarian computers

East Europe's freewheeling

COMPUTER skills are becoming important in adult education in Hungary. Last month alone, the Society for the Dissemination of Scientific Knowledge (TIT) launched 15 new programming courses just in Budapest, and Hungarian television began a 16-part course in BASIC, with an optional examination and diploma for successful students at the end, and video-cassettes for those unable to watch regularly. Yet only three years ago, the Central Statistical Office estimated that there were altogether just 2,664 computers operating in Hungary, of which only 919 were of a higher capacity. Now, according to the official news agency MTI, there are between 50,000 and 100,000 personal computers, mostly in private hands and some 200 micro-computer clubs. Approximately a million people (a tenth of the population) have by now encountered computer skills.

This enthusiasm for personal computers is partly a result of government policy, which has been urging computerization of the economy for some 10 years. The cost of mainframe hardware and operation was, however, prohibitive (a computer-hour on a mainframe cost as much as two months' salary for a skilled administrator). The arrival of the "personal" computer (of both Western and socialist provenance) virtually coincided with a new policy of decentralization in all branches of the economy, so that enterprise and farm managers found themselves faced with decision-making of precisely the type where a small computer proved invaluable. The ever increasing small-business private sector likewise found that a computer was, if not a necessity, a potent status symbol.

The Ministry of Education and Culture quickly responded to the new challenge. By September 1983, all secondary schools (in theory) had their own computer and computing skills became a compulsory part of the syllabus. (Vacation courses had to be hastily arranged for the teachers assigned to the new duty, who seem frequently to have been outstripped by their pupils.) Expanding the role of computers in higher education is a constant theme at conferences of educationalists.

The Hungarians, however, are not content with using computers only for work. Computer games are one of the most desirable souvenirs that returning tourists can take home from the West. This, indeed, is true in many socialist countries where youth leaders frequently draw attention to the ideological hazards of space invaders and star wars software. The Hungarian authorities, however, prefer to treat the games as a social vice comparable with tobacco or alcohol, imposing a swingeing 60 per cent duty on all such imports. **Vera Rich**