

Combating Degree Mills



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Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić (UNESCO)

John Daniel (Commonwealth of Learning - COL)

CHEA and UNESCO have been working together on an advisory statement on international practices to discourage and eliminate degree mills. What has been done and what are likely future actions?

Outline

The integrity of the global higher education system is threatened by the multiplication of bogus operations known as degree mills. They respond to the booming demand for advanced qualifications, particularly in the developing world, by offering spurious credentials. The internationalisation of higher education and the steady extension of the Internet both facilitate their operations and also make it easier for them to cover their tracks when authorities move against them.

The internationalisation of quality assurance has accompanied these trends and is gaining new momentum. Some manifestations of this are: the OECD's program on Assessing Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO); the burgeoning business of international university rankings (e.g. the UK's *Times Higher*; Shanghai Jiaotong University); and the Bologna process with its European Standards and Guidelines.

Intergovernmental organisations with mandates in education, such as UNESCO and COL, are working in various ways to protect the integrity of international higher education and to promote capacity-building for quality assurance.

In that respect, UNESCO has created the *Global Forum for Quality Assurance and the Recognition of Qualifications in Higher Education* in order to give all stakeholders the opportunity to discuss emerging issues. UNESCO and the OECD have developed *Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Cross-Border Higher Education*, which are now being used by many countries in developing their own legislation and/or policies. To guide students through new HE spaces, UNESCO has launched an Internet portal that will bring together lists, provided by national governments, of the higher education institutions that are officially recognised in their territories. This is now being expanded to include more countries. We encourage all governments to provide such 'white lists' so that students and others concerned about the authenticity of institutions and credentials can check their status. Developing suggestions for effective

practices to discourage degree mills is a continuation of this work and so UNESCO and COL partnered with CHEA to internationalise the debate.

Combating degree mills requires a multi-pronged attack. First, countries must want to protect the integrity of their higher education systems. This requires good communication within governments so that the education authorities are aware of all companies that register in order to conduct an educational business on their territories and can make judgements about their legitimacy. Second, quality assurance agencies must tackle the difficult challenge of bringing cross-border eLearning within their ambit. Third, all bodies granting financial aid to students, or defraying tuition fees, should ensure they are not inadvertently supporting degree mills. Fourth, employers, higher education admissions officers, immigration officials, etc. must check credentials presented to them. As with other forms of crime, the certainty of discovery is the strongest deterrent. Fifth, the media, including the Internet, should be used more aggressively to make the public aware of bogus educational institutions. Finally, it would be helpful to have an international network for information and alerts about degree mill activity, since spurious operators are internationally mobile and can quickly re-appear in a new jurisdiction when another closes them down.

Introduction

It is a pleasure for us to address you on *Combating Degree Mills*. All developments have their good and their bad sides. The emergence of the knowledge society and economy has many positive features. Living in a society based on information and knowledge encourages people to pursue their education further and gives them opportunities for more interesting and satisfying jobs.

But there is a downside. We can think of credentials, especially the degrees and diplomas associated with higher education, as the passports to the knowledge society. Just as some crooks sell fake passports to illegal immigrants and others counterfeit money, so yet other crooks have seen the opportunity to market fake passports for knowledge workers in the form of counterfeit or valueless diploma and degree certificates. The organisations that sell these bogus credentials are usually called degree mills, which is the term we shall use today. Closely linked to them are accreditation mills that are created to give degree mills a spurious cover of legitimacy.

Three developments have made degree mills a more urgent problem for the global higher education community.

First, networks of legitimate higher education institutions are not expanding fast enough to satisfy the burgeoning demand in the developing world. Desperate students are turning to degree mills: some because they believe them to be legitimate institutions, others because, although they know them to be phoney, they believe they can pass their credentials off successfully to employers.

Second, the internationalisation of higher education leads students to look beyond their national borders. More students are going abroad to study and more are studying at a distance with foreign providers while remaining at home. Degree mills try to present themselves as legitimate cross-border providers.

Third, expanding connectivity makes the Internet accessible in all corners of the globe. The Web gives degree mills the opportunity to present themselves inexpensively, yet impressively, to a worldwide

audience. For example, one degree mill reproduced a photo of Blenheim Palace, Winston Churchill's birthplace, on its website, implying that this was its campus.

In the first part of this session we shall inform you about what the global higher education community is doing, through its intergovernmental organisations, to make life more difficult for degree mills. This is a by-product of work that has been going on for many years, most notably at UNESCO, to put in place structures and processes in support of the internationalisation of higher education. This work has various aims, the most important of which is to help students find their way around in this new world.

In the second part of the session we will throw the challenge to you and ask what we can do together to clip the wings of degree mills. There is no magic bullet that will kill them, but by acting on a number of fronts simultaneously we can make the operation of degree mills a less attractive criminal activity.

The Commonwealth of Learning has two particular concerns. First, COL helps developing countries to expand open, distance and eLearning. Degree mills often purport to use these approaches and therefore tend to bring all technology-mediated learning into disrepute and hinder the legitimate use of these modern approaches to teaching and learning in all institutions.

Second, two-thirds of the countries in the 53-member Commonwealth are small states, such as the Caribbean and Pacific islands. These states are particularly vulnerable to degree mills, which either use them as safe havens for their operations or take advantage of their students, who usually have limited higher education provision in their own countries.

The Work of International Organisations

We begin by describing what international organisations are doing and why UNESCO engages in these activities.

Higher Education is becoming increasingly international. Demand for it is constantly growing and there are now well over 125 million students enrolled in tertiary education worldwide. Some governments, however, can no longer respond to this growing demand by creating more state institutions, so a whole range of new providers are filling the gap: cross-border providers, private higher education institutions, and organisations offering eLearning through the Internet.

This growing variety of providers raises issues of quality and the recognition of qualifications. The internationalisation of quality assurance, which has accompanied these trends, is today gaining new momentum. Some manifestations of this are: the OECD's Feasibility Study involving a selected number of countries for a program on Assessing Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO); the burgeoning business of international university rankings (e.g. the UK's *Times Higher*; Shanghai Jiaotong University); and the Bologna process with its European Standards and Guidelines.

Older international networks for Quality Assurance such as INQAAHE are repositioning themselves and regional QA networks, including some new ones, are being strengthened to provide more capacity and expertise in quality assurance at institutional and system level: ANQAHE, AfriQAN, APQN, CANQATE, RIACES...

Through its different functions UNESCO brings these new developments together at the global level. Its standard-setting instruments, which include six UNESCO Conventions for the Recognition of Degrees and Qualifications in Higher Education, are now being revised to meet the challenges of globalisation. Another example is the 2005 Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-Border Higher Education that were developed jointly with the OECD to address the quality issues that arise when higher education crosses national borders.

Capacity-Building activities were developed through UNESCO's Global Forum on Quality Assurance, Accreditation and the Recognition of Qualifications in Higher Education. Meetings held in 2002, 2004, and 2007 provided a platform for policy debate and generated regional capacity-building initiatives. More recently, a UNESCO-World Bank Global Initiative for Quality Assurance Capacity, GIQAC, was launched.

Finally, an important strand of activity, especially designed to help students, occurs through UNESCO's Clearinghouse functions. Examples are the publication *Study Abroad* and the newly launched Portal on recognised higher education institutions. Our involvement in developing effective international practices to combat degree mills builds on this previous work. We will briefly elaborate on some of them.

UNESCO partnered with the OECD to develop Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Cross-Border Higher Education that were adopted by both organisations in 2005 and published by both organisations. The texts are identical but some say that they are implementing "the OECD guidelines, not the UNESCO ones!" We believe in giving people a choice!

Through its global outreach UNESCO has made the Guidelines available in the six UN languages to help with the regulation of quality in CBHE by involving six groups of stakeholders (governments, student bodies, HEIs, recognition bodies, quality assurance bodies and professional bodies). One strong recommendation is better dialogue and collaboration between sending and receiving countries.

A new partnership between UNESCO and the World Bank was created in late 2007 to develop capacity-building in quality assurance in developing and transition countries. Formally launched in January 2008, it covers a wide range of institutions through one international and four regional networks of quality assurance bodies through training, information dissemination, developments of glossaries, staff exchanges. It covers networks in Africa, the Arab states, Asia and the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean as well as the international network INQAAHE.

As part of its clearinghouse function UNESCO launched a Portal on recognised higher education institutions in April 2008. Presently it includes data on 23 countries and he hope to increase this to 60 this year. This Portal is a logical follow up to the UNESCO/OECD Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-border Higher Education. It aims to help students, employers, and other interested parties (e.g. credential evaluators) by giving them access to authoritative and up-to-date information on the status of HEIs and QA in participating countries. You could call it a white list of recognised institutions. As well as listing the recognised institutions, each country's entry gives useful information on the organisation of its higher education system.

International Organisations and Degree Mills

What about degree mills? How do they operate? How does quality assurance relate to them?

A particular concern is that some Degree Mills misuse UNESCO's name. There are examples of different levels of abuse and use. The claims that these bogus operators make may range from 100% false to not quite untrue. They use a multitude of tricks, all of which try to establish a false connection or misrepresent a real link with UNESCO to give the impression that their outfit is an internationally recognised provider of higher education. One institution may use several different tricks. These institutions mutate rapidly. We will give a few examples to illustrate this.

This degree mill invites you to verify its bona fides by corresponding with the Embassy of Liberia here in Washington. Or you can call a phone number which happens to be that of the Director of Higher Education at UNESCO.

Here this body calling itself the Educational Accreditation Association says that its accredited institutions accept and adopt *The Recommendations of the World Conference on Higher Education, sponsored by UNESCO* and the applicable sections of the *UNESCO Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-Border Higher Education*. You will also notice web links to UNESCO and WHO.

So how do we tackle the problem?

The Council on Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) has had a long involvement in UNESCO's activities, in particular the CBHE Guidelines and the Portal on recognised higher education institutions. It was therefore a natural development for the two organisations to set up an expert group in November 2008 to develop suggestions for international effective practice on degree mills. UNESCO and COL are alerting the developing countries to the threat of degree mills. The UNESCO Portal will publicise the statement on international effective practices once the work is finalised.

We have set the stage by informing you of the range of international initiatives that are putting some structure and order into the rapidly growing field of international education. You will have noticed that the focus has been on helping institutions and students to know what is legitimate and also to establish traditions of good practice when legitimate institutions spread their wings across borders.

We are now going to suggest how to address the problem of degree mills more directly. Much of what we shall say is inspired by two meetings on degree mills that have been convened by CHEA and UNESCO. These brought together an impressive range of expertise from various countries and organisations and we shall draw heavily on the conclusions of our discussions.

What is a Degree Mill?

The lawyers in our group were very keen that we should develop a crisp definition of a degree mill, arguing that you have to charge the criminal with a crime. However, the majority thought that impossible. The most watertight definition is: "A degree mill offers a credential purely in exchange for payment and nothing else".

But this definition misses a host of operations that do require something else: like sending a CV or answering a skill-testing question such as ‘in which country would you find New York City?’

The way to identify a wider range of degree mills is to run them through a number of filter statements. If any one of the statements applies to an operation further questions are in order. Here is a list:

The operation:

- Does not have legal authority to award degrees in its home jurisdiction.
- Requires little attendance, either in classrooms or online.
- Requires little, if any, coursework or assignments.
- Limits its contact information to a phone number or an e-mail address.
- Makes false claims about external quality assurance or accreditation.
- Issues degrees that are not accepted for licensing or graduate admission in the home jurisdiction.
- Does not provide verifiable faculty lists, or lists faculty with credentials from degree mills.
- Features websites that copy or imitate material from legitimate organisations.
- Has a website with internet domain registration obscured by a privacy service.

Moving into Attack Mode

How do we close down degree mills? In Nigeria our colleague Peter Okebukola moved in with the riot police on a slew of bogus operations simultaneously, but you may not have enough clout for that.

This list of features of dodgy operations helps us develop strategies to combat them. We recommend seven steps by different actors.

Step one is to help the buyer beware. We have described what UNESCO is doing to help students become savvy consumers. The task is to make them aware of the danger signals we have just listed and encourage them to consult the white lists on UNESCO’s portal.

Step two is to make governments want to protect the integrity of their higher education systems. Happily there are incentives for this. Now that international higher education is big business (it is Australia’s third most valuable export after coal and iron ore), countries want to protect the legitimacy of their systems. The UK has closed down hundreds of bogus colleges in recent years. In the US the number of states banning or restricting the use of unaccredited degrees has risen from 2 to 11 in ten years. The number of states still regarded as safe havens for degree mills is now small.

An important step is to protect, through legislation, the use of terms like ‘university’ and ‘accreditation’.

A similar dynamic operates in small states. Last year, when Seychelles introduced legislation to set up a National University of the Seychelles it discovered and closed down several degree mills operating from

its territory. A particular challenge for small states is offshore medical schools. Most of these are not out-and-out degree mills but operate in a twilight zone offering students the early years of a medical curriculum from which they can, in theory, move to a medical school with a complete programme. These operations are of considerable economic significance for some small states, which are not eager to create difficulties for them unless they undermine the credibility of all the credentials offered by the country's tertiary institutions.

However, as small states like Seychelles become more committed to providing legitimate higher education on their territories, they are taking a closer interest in such offshore operations. Legislation will prevent this medical school from calling itself the University of the Seychelles.

Governments should be more active in prosecuting degree mill operators. All fraudulent credentials are a danger to the public, yet authorities do not yet treat the issuing of phoney degree certificates as seriously as they would the counterfeiting of currency or passports. National HE communities should assist the police and the courts in this regard, as has happened to good effect in Nigeria, where the police closed down dozens of degree mills in a major operation.

Step three is for governments to set up transparent structures and processes in support of their legitimate higher education networks. This usually means agencies with responsibilities for quality assurance, accreditation and qualifications frameworks. Depending on national governance traditions these may be public bodies or private bodies (e.g. trade associations) operating with state approval. A number of functions need to be performed.

First, the country should have a list of its accredited/recognised degree awarding bodies and a mechanism for updating it. We hope there will be a snowball effect whereby more and more countries contribute these lists to the UNESCO portal. Once a critical mass of countries is reached, students will be wary of enrolling in institutions based in countries that do not appear on the portal. It will also make it easier for national authorities to make decisions about recognising the credentials issued by cross-border providers operating in their country. If an institution and its degrees are not recognised or accepted in its home country it is a fair assumption that it is a degree mill.

Second, a quality assurance agency can be very helpful in raising the general level of performance of institutions and reminding the public that the correlation between quality and institutional longevity is not perfect. New institutions sometimes outperform old ones. In the interests of widening access to higher education it is important to encourage low quality institutions operating in the grey zone between out-and-out degree mills and respected institutions to raise their game and become respected. External quality assurance can help with this.

Third, we have been surprised that even small states have a strong interest in qualifications frameworks. The Commonwealth of Learning is helping 32 small states to collaborate on the development and delivery of eLearning through the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth. The Transnational Qualifications Framework that was developed to facilitate this has attracted great interest. Simply that having a qualifications framework against which to benchmark cross-border programmes also discourages fly-by-night operations.

Step four is related to step three but goes slightly wider. We presume that if governments are aware of the distinction between recognised and non-recognised institutions in their jurisdiction they will not give public funds to those that are not recognised – or to the students that enrol in them. However, the term ‘recognised’ can be ambiguous. The government department that gives licenses for companies to operate must have a mechanism for bringing companies that offer educational credentials to the attention of the education department so that degree mills cannot imply that they are ‘accredited’ simply on the basis of a licence to operate a business.

The issue becomes more complex when governments, foundations or companies fund students to take courses overseas. Such bodies should verify that they are not inadvertently supporting degree mills. Here again, the development of UNESCO’s portal of white lists of accredited institutions will be an invaluable tool.

Step five is for everyone to raise their game in checking credentials presented to them. In recent years passport technology and verification has become more sophisticated and similar sophistication needs to be brought to the passports to the knowledge society known as academic credentials. George Gollin estimates that some 200,000 phoney credentials are sold each year in the US alone, including both documents issued by degree mills and counterfeit certificates and transcripts bearing the names of reputable institutions. While some of the people buying these products are gullible and think they are getting the real thing, many know that the qualifications they are buying are phoney but calculate that they can pass them off successfully with employers and others.

The most effective deterrent to crime is the certainty of being discovered and brought to justice. Were the checking of credentials by employers, admissions officers, immigration officials, etc. to become the norm, degree mills would soon be out of business.

Back in 1860 between one-third and one-half of the currency in circulation in the United States was counterfeit. On the last day of his life President Abraham Lincoln ordered that this problem be addressed and the Secret Service was created. We are not suggesting that the higher education community create an international secret service to close down degree mills, but it would not be difficult, in principle, to be much more effective in protecting the integrity of academic certification.

Public-key cryptography, the mechanism for conducting secure financial transactions over non-secure communications networks, can provide a technical solution to the challenge of authenticating academic documents such as transcripts and diplomas. It would need an appropriate system to manage universities’ public keys so that only legitimate universities are issued keys by a “certificate authority”. This technology coupled with reliable portals – such as the UNESCO portal – could drive most counterfeiters and degree mills out of business.

Step six is for international organisations, particularly UNESCO and the World Health Organization (WHO) to take more assertive action against those who misuse their names or logos. We have shown you some slides of phoney degree certificates that claim non-existent relationships with UNESCO. The World Health Organization has a similar problem with medical schools whose website does not make clear what the claimed recognition by the WHO actually means.

The web is a tool of choice for degree mills. Obviously, to take the real example that we gave, it is cheaper to put on your website a picture of Blenheim Palace, Winston Churchill's birthplace, and imply that it is your campus, than to build a real facility. Let us hope that with the development of Web 2.0, degree mills will be hoisted with their own petard as people use blogs, etc. to expose fraudulent operations.

This should be combined with consistent use of other media. They should be discouraged from carrying advertisements from degree mills and give publicity to court cases involving their prosecution.

Step seven is for the international HE community to set up an informal system of alerts and black lists. Such a system is best kept informal for two reasons. First, some degree mill operators are audaciously litigious and try to scare off investigators and suppress unfavourable publicity by instigating large lawsuits. Second, the Internet has made it very easy, if investigators are in hot pursuit, to close a degree mill and restart it with a new name in a different jurisdiction.

Such informal information networks already exist to a considerable extent. Most college registrars usually have a set of documents in a locked drawer that help them make judgements about institutions.

Conclusion

We conclude by reaffirming that degree mills are a significant threat to the integrity of higher education systems. They present problems to students, employers, legitimate higher education providers, quality assurance agencies and governments. They will pose a particular danger to the expansion of international education if the higher education community does not combine to fight degree mills on a global basis.

We have informed you of what is being done and what you can do to help combat this particular manifestation of academic fraud.