

FRAUDOC Diploma mills and fraudulent qualifications

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FRAUDOC Project

Guidelines on Diploma Mills and Document Fraud for Credential Evaluators

Partners: 6 NARIC centres (Italy, Belgium-FL, Denmark, Estonia, Portugal and Sweden) + 3 ENICs as external partners (Canada, New Zealand and USA).

Duration: 01/02/2016 – 31/01/2018

Two main outputs:

(i) **A Guide on Diploma Mills:** this instrument will be created for the benefit of all credential evaluators worldwide. It will present the phenomenon of Diploma Mills starting from the national and international experience of the participating NARICs and it will provide all the necessary elements in order to detect the institutions that claim to be recognised and all the practices they use to operate (i.e. accreditation mills and fake credential evaluation centres).

(ii) **A Handbook on Document Fraud:** this instrument will be created for the benefit of ENIC-NARIC centres only: due to the sensitive topic, we prefer not to disseminate this instrument, taking into account that we will collect all the examples of available tools and instruments useful to forge documents (i.e. email spoofing, website spoofing, etc.). Thanks to this instrument, the ENIC-NARIC centres will be able to be conscious about this phenomenon and to develop innovative instruments and procedures to detect fraudulent qualifications.



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Definition

“**Degree Mills**” or “**Diploma Mills**” are institutions, that declare to be recognised or accredited, but they are not in any higher education system. Not all of the non recognised institutions are to be defined diploma mills. There are also new examples of “Mills”: **Accreditation Mills**, **Credential Evaluation Mills** and **VISA Mills**.

The terminology used in this field depends on whether

the **qualification** (fake degree/diploma, bogus degree/diploma) is

- not recognised
- not recognisable
- fake or irregular

the **institution** (diploma/degree mill, fake/bogus institution, non-accredited institution) is

- not recognised
- not accredited
- fake or irregular

Definition of “Diploma Mills” according to Webster's Third New International Dictionary: “An institution of higher education operating without supervision of a state or professional agency and granting diplomas which are either fraudulent or because of the lack of proper standards worthless”.

Available sources of information

Most countries provide a list of recognised/accredited higher education institutions.

There are some lists of Diploma Mills, documents with their names or professional discussion networks on single cases.

The right approach is always to start with the official sources of the respective country to verify if an institution is listed in the available sources.

Articles in the international press on the phenomenon of Diploma Mills and Fake Institutions have increased lately.

See also the dedicated webpage on the [ENIC-NARIC website](#).

Lists of official institutions

Most of the countries publish a list of official institutions online. This can be a problem when the lists are only published in the national language, a different alphabet or terminology.

Examples of international databases:

- ENIC-NARIC: <http://www.enic-naric.net/country-pages.aspx>
- IAU: <http://www.whed.net/home.php>
- NUFFIC: <https://www.epnuffic.nl/en/#tab-foreign-education-systems>
- CIMEA: <http://www.cimea.it/countryModules.aspx>
- UNESCO:
<http://www.unesco.org/new/en/education/resources/unesco-portal-to-recognized-higher-education-institutions/>

How they operate

- online
- key message: life experience degree
- they operate in systems where, according to them, there is no “legal value” (but actually there is accreditation)
- they use names that are similar to official HEIs or that are misleading
- they close all kinds of agreements with official institutions, or at least try to do so
- they issue degrees with apostille and with all the required elements (sometimes with a Diploma Supplement)
- they know the recognition regulations very well
- they use legal vacuums or interpretation to operate (see “Doctor”)
- they issue honorary degrees to leading figures
- they promote their institutions using official instruments and they seek for accreditation in higher education networks and associations that are not connected with the authorities that deal with recognition issues (advertisement on GU, ISO9000)
- they declare to be recognised by international organisations (UNESCO, CoE, European Commission, etc.)
- aggressive and intimidating behaviour towards official institutions that have to recognise their qualifications.
- they use the Lisbon Recognition Convention on recognition in a misleading way and they define themselves the defenders of the academic freedom
- they open Accreditation Mills and agencies for the evaluation of fake credentials

Checklist

1. Is the qualification bought or ordered?
2. The institution emphasises its accreditation?
3. You can't find its accreditation in any national system?
4. Does the students not have to fulfil any duties in order to get the qualification?
5. Does the final qualification refer to several education systems?
6. Are the learning outcomes of the students not tested for the accumulation of credits?
7. Is the time to achieve the qualification shorter than the normally needed time to complete comparable studies?
8. Does the institution declare to be recognised on international level and quotes international organisations?
9. Does the institution define itself "global", "worldwide" or "international"?
10. Is the qualification awarded for the evaluation of the CV that the student sent? Or is it a qualification for "life experience"?
11. Does the institution issue honorary degrees?
12. Are the student fees too low or too high compared to the standard?
13. Does the institution not mention the location where the courses take place and there is only a Postbox address?
14. Isn't there any list of faculties, departments or professors of the institution?
15. Has the institution a similar name to a very well known one?
16. Does the institution named qualifications with official names of another HE system?
17. Does the institution declare that it is not directly responsible to award final qualifications but those are awarded by another foreign institution?
18. Does the institution justify the authenticity of their qualifications only because they issue qualifications with the Apostille?
19. Does the institution underline that the accreditation it is not necessary as a practice in some systems?
20. Does the institution propose discount or payments with credit cards on their website?

If the answer to one of those questions is YES we need to investigate further

A particular case: corruption

In these cases the accredited / recognised HEIs award qualifications to students that never attended any study course.

These cases are difficult to verify and unfortunately we don't have many tools that can help us.

Variety of fake documents

- 1. Modification of official documents**
- 2. Creation of fake documents without specific format**
- 3. Imitation of official format**
- 4. Modification of supporting documents (transcript, stamps, certifications, declarations, etc.)**

Conclusion

The best way to verify the status of an institution is to always consult the official lists of the country where the HEI declares to operate in.

Don't get scared of the aggressive approach that some fake or non-recognised institutions have, as they don't have any possibility to get recognition or to proceed against you. BUT be careful to provide a clear and short justification of your denial of recognition!

Remember to always ask the official name of the institution and the issued qualification.

Make sure that nobody of your institution closed agreements with non-accredited or non-recognised institutions and in case inform your public authority.

DON'T GET SCARED, BUT...

Use normal cautiousness during the verification of qualifications, and be careful about: signatures, given data, stamps, names, language correctness.

Archive examples of previous qualifications, especially for the more complicated systems, in order to be able to compare the formats, elements and signatures.

Always work with the qualifications issued in the original language of the respective system and institution, and only as a second step with supporting documents (like translations).

Use all the online available sources of information to verify the qualification (there are not many).

Be careful about irregular cases, where the combination of elements makes you have “reasonable” doubts.

CONTACT THE ISSUING INSTITUTION FOR VERIFICATION AND CREATE A DATABASE OF CONTACTS.

EXPERIENCE is important: use available training, also on the internet, inform yourselves on different systems and institutions. The time spent on one difficult case will be useful for all the others.

ASK YOUR COLLEAGUES IN OTHER COUNTRIES TO SHOW YOU THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THEIR QUALIFICATIONS, THEY CAN HELP YOU TO VERIFY QUICKLY YOUR CASES.

Grazie!!!

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