



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization

# TOWARD EFFECTIVE PRACTICE: DISCOURAGING DEGREE MILLS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

COUNCIL FOR HIGHER EDUCATION ACCREDITATION

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UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL, SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

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## ***TOWARD EFFECTIVE PRACTICE: DISCOURAGING DEGREE MILLS IN HIGHER EDUCATION***

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### ***INTRODUCTION***

A small group of higher education, accreditation and quality assurance and credential evaluation experts came together in 2008 to explore the challenge and problem of “degree mills” or bogus providers of higher education, particularly as these operations affect the growing internationalization of higher education. Seeking to stimulate an international dialogue, the group developed a series of suggestions for effective practice in this area. The statement that emerged is intended for academic staff and administrators, accreditation and quality assurance professionals, credential evaluators, national governments and international organizations concerned with quality in higher education in an international setting. It is also intended to guide students, particularly from developing countries, in seeking opportunities for international education.

This statement serves as a companion to the recent UNESCO/OECD document, *Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-Border Higher Education*, released in 2005. Consistent with the *Guidelines*, the statement urges that governments around the world examine their legal and regulatory frameworks with the goal of eliminating degree mills in the future. It also is a resource for users of the UNESCO *Portal on Higher Education Institutions* launched in 2008.

While degree mills have been operating internationally for many years, they have received limited attention from academic staff and administrators as well as accreditation and quality assurance professionals. Yet, the extraordinary growth in access and demand for higher education internationally, with students electing to attend colleges and universities across various countries, increases the likelihood of the use of these providers.

Degree mills offer credentials based on little study or engagement in higher education activity. They are easy to start, difficult to eliminate and, at least to date, relatively immune to regulation. Degree mills are part of an emerging academic corruption that, unfortunately, is accompanying the growth of access and participation in higher education worldwide.

Degree mills are the result of the expanding pressure on students to obtain higher education credentials, on employers to hire individuals with such credentials and on countries to expand the knowledge base of their workforce and to meet demands for creative and innovative responses to educational needs.

Students may be looking for shortcuts to education credentials as they seek employment. Some students are misled by what is offered by degree mills, but others knowingly pay a significant fee in order to claim (falsely) that they have completed a legitimate course of study leading to reliable certification. Unscrupulous individuals respond, exploiting the current demand for higher education credentials in many countries. The Internet gives these individuals an instant platform from which to launch degree mills, which students often cannot readily distinguish from the online learning opportunities offered by legitimate institutions.

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Degree mills harm students and society. Students who are unknowing victims of degree mills are harmed when they invest a considerable amount of money for credits or credentials that cannot be used for, e.g., transfer to another institution, entry to graduate school or employment. Society is harmed when fraudulent credentials are issued in areas that put public health and safety at risk, e.g., engineering or the health-related professions. The international work of legitimate higher education providers – reliable evaluation of credentials, successful transfer of credit, reconciling differences in degree structure – is undermined by degree mills.

### **DESCRIBING DEGREE MILLS**

There is not, at present, a single, shared international definition of “degree mills” or “bogus providers.” A number of individual countries have established definitions, however, and have also identified key features of these operations that are obvious wherever mills set up service. Description of these features provides a foundation for challenging mills now and in the future and can, over time, lead to a single international definition of these operations.

We are *certain* we are dealing with a degree mill when the operation is accurately described as one that “...offers a credential purely in exchange for payment and nothing else.” Money – and only money – is sufficient to obtain a credential at any level and in almost any area.

We are *likely* to be dealing with a degree mill when the operation is accurately described by some or all of the following. Any one of these descriptors should be cause for concern. “Degree mills”:

- Lack legal authority to operate as higher education institutions or award degrees.
- Require little if any attendance, either on-site or online.
- Require little if any coursework or few if any assignments to obtain a credential.
- Do not provide information about location of incorporation, ownership or governance.
- Provide little or no contact information other than telephone or email address.
- Publish false or exaggerated claims of external quality review (accreditation or quality assurance).
- Issue degrees that are not accepted for licensing or entry into graduate or professional programs in the degree mill’s home country.
- List academic staff whose degrees were issued by degree mills or are unable to provide verifiable lists of academic staff and their qualifications.
- Plagiarize material from legitimate institutions for inclusion on degree mill Websites.
- Feature Websites with Internet domain registration that is obscured by a privacy service rather than being publicly accessible.

## **TOWARD EFFECTIVE INTERNATIONAL PRACTICE**

The following actions are suggested to assist in fighting the growing international presence of degree mills. They are offered as advice and guidance, not mandates, and provide an array of ambitious initiatives to be considered, as appropriate, by higher education and quality assurance leaders, national governments and international bodies.

### **1. Create Tools for Identification of Degree Mills**

1. Identify and regionally, nationally and internationally publicize key characteristics and common practices of degree mills.
2. Work toward a common international definition of degree mills.
3. Publicize in-country legal definitions of degree mills.
4. Propose international security standards for documents relating to higher education credentials (e.g., transcripts, degrees, diplomas) for use in countries with reliable and up-to-date lists of legitimate providers.
5. Take advantage of advancing document verification technologies to make document checking simple and inexpensive for employers, admissions officers, immigration officials, etc.

### **2. Use Evidence of Quality Provided by Acknowledged Competent Authorities on Academic Quality Such as Recognized Accreditation and Quality Assurance Bodies**

1. Confirm that higher education providers are in good standing with recognized accreditation and quality assurance bodies in all the countries in which they are operating.
2. Use and promote the lists of reliable institutions and programs provided by accrediting organizations and quality assurance bodies.
3. Use reliable country-based lists of legitimate higher education providers such as those available through the UNESCO *Portal on Higher Education Institutions*.

### **3. Encourage Providers of Public and Private Funding for Higher Education to Avoid Funding of Degree Mills and Their Students**

1. Encourage countries to take action to assure that degree mills do not receive public funds.
2. Urge countries to support the integrity of their own processes for institutional accreditation and avoid giving political credibility to degree mills within their borders.
3. Urge countries to take action to assure that publicly funded financial aid does not go to students attending degree mills, including international students.
4. Encourage corporations and foundations to take steps to avoid providing financial assistance (e.g., scholarships, tuition assistance) to students attending degree mills.

5. Assure that multi-national organizations avoid providing financial assistance to degree mills or their students.

#### **4. *Inform the Public about Degree Mills***

1. Routinely inform the students, parents and schools about the harm generated by degree mills.
2. Encourage print and electronic advertisers of colleges and universities to confine their publications to legitimate providers and not degree mills.
3. Identify and publicize questionable marketing and recruitment practices associated with degree mills.
4. Urge Internet providers to routinely alert the public to be cautious about the ready availability of electronically based degree mills.
5. Make aggressive use of the press in fighting degree mills through publicizing efforts to expose and prosecute degree mill providers.
6. Urge employers to become informed and use tools to authenticate credentials presented by prospective and current employers.

#### **5. *Pursue Legal Action Against Degree Mills and Use of Fraudulent Credentials***

1. Encourage and assist with the development of laws in individual countries that make establishing, licensing and operating degree mills illegal.
2. Work to make the use of counterfeit credentials for, e.g. obtaining or upgrading employment, illegal.
3. Encourage prosecution of degree mill providers and knowing users of fraudulent credentials where appropriate.
4. Legally protect the use of key higher education terms such as “college,” “university” and “accreditation.”
5. Urge action to discourage and eliminate “accreditation mills” or rogue providers of quality assurance developed by degree mills.
6. Encourage governments to develop immigration policies that protect against abuses associated with counterfeit credentials.

#### **6. *Focus on Cross-border Degree Mill Operation***

1. Establish cross-border agreements among countries to discourage degree mills such as those suggested in the UNESCO/OECD *Guidelines* (2005).
2. Work with multi-national and regional organizations to enhance awareness of degree mills and provide tools to identify and discourage their use.
3. Promote the use of the UNESCO *Portal* or entry point to all countries’ legitimate higher education institutions and accreditation/quality assurance bodies.
4. Identify and share characteristics and practices of degree mills operating internationally.
5. Develop an international network for information and alerts about degree mill activity.
6. Support legitimate and value-added examples of cross-border higher education, whether developed through regulation, incentives or partnerships.

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A number of other suggestions emerged from the meetings. In addition to addressing degree mill providers and fraudulent credentials, the group noted that there is a need to identify fraudulent credential evaluation services that operate internationally. Reliable services in credential evaluation and accreditation/quality assurance can trademark their respective stamps, thereby establishing a legal basis for action against rogue services that make inappropriate use of these marks. Participants spoke to the growth of “accreditation mills” or bogus providers of quality assurance, often created to provide the appearance of external quality review of degree mills. There was discussion of the leadership role that multi-national organizations can play in conducting international workshops on degree mills, working with colleagues in various countries to identify and take action against these providers. An international public awareness and education campaign can accompany these workshop efforts.

## **SUMMARY**

Degree mills are and will continue to be a significant international problem for students, employers, the public, legitimate providers of higher education and accreditation/quality assurance and national governments. The suggestions offered here are intended to promote an international dialogue leading to effective international practice to address this important issue. To ignore degree mills is to undermine the capacity of countries to meet expanding demands for access while assuring high-quality education. To ignore degree mills reduces opportunity for students and countries to use the benefits of education to participate effectively in the international community.

**APPENDIX I**  
**MATRIX OF EFFECTIVE PRACTICES ARRAYED BY SECTOR/ACTOR**

<b>Create Tools for Identification of Degree Mills</b>					
	Government	Institution	QA Agency	HE Representative Group	Press
Identify and regionally, nationally and internationally publicize key characteristics and common practices of mills.	X		X	X	X
Work toward a common international definition of degree mills.			X	X	
Publicize in-country legal definitions of degree mills.	X	X	X		X
Propose international security standards for documents relating to higher education credentials (e.g. transcripts, degrees, diplomas) for use in countries with reliable and up to date lists of legitimate providers.	X	X	X	X	
Take advantage of advancing document verification technologies to make document checking simple and inexpensive for employers, admissions officers, immigration officials, etc.	X	X		X	
<b>Use Evidence of Quality Provided by Acknowledged Competent Authorities on Academic Quality Such as Recognized Accreditation and Quality Assurance Bodies</b>					
	Government	Institution	QA Agency	HE Representative Group	Press
Confirm that higher education providers are in good standing with recognized accreditation and quality assurance bodies in all the countries in which they are operating.			X	X	
Use and promote the lists of reliable institutions and programs provided by accrediting organizations and quality assurance bodies.	X	X	X	X	
Use reliable country-based lists of legitimate higher education providers such as those available through the UNESCO <i>Portal on Higher Education Institutions</i> .	X	X	X	X	X

**APPENDIX I**  
**MATRIX OF EFFECTIVE PRACTICES ARRAYED BY SECTOR/ACTOR**

<b>Encourage Providers of Public and Private Funding for Higher Education to Avoid Funding of Degree Mills and Their Students</b>					
	Government	Institution	QA Agency	HE Representative Group	Press
Encourage countries to take action to assure that degree mills do not receive public funds.	X		X	X	X
Urge countries to support the integrity of their own processes for institutional accreditation and avoid giving political credibility to degree mills within their borders.	X		X		
Urge countries to take action to assure that publicly funded financial aid does not go to students attending degree mills, including international students.	X	X	X	X	
Encourage corporations and foundations to take steps to avoid providing financial assistance (e.g., scholarships, tuition assistance) to students attending degree mills.	X			X	X
Assure that multi-national organizations avoid providing financial assistance to degree mills or their students.	X				
<b>Inform the Public about Degree Mills</b>					
	Government	Institution	QA Agency	HE Representative Group	Press
Routinely inform the students, parents and schools about the harm generated by degree mills.	X	X	X	X	X
Encourage print and electronic advertisers of colleges and universities to confine their publications to legitimate providers and not degree mills.				X	
Identify and publicize questionable marketing and recruitment practices associated with degree mills.				X	
Urge Internet providers to routinely alert the public to be cautious about the ready availability of electronically based degree mills.		X		X	X

**APPENDIX I**  
**MATRIX OF EFFECTIVE PRACTICES ARRAYED BY SECTOR/ACTOR**

<b>Inform the Public about Degree Mills (Cont.)</b>					
	Government	Institution	QA Agency	HE Representative Group	Press
Make aggressive use of the press in fighting degree mills through publicizing efforts to expose and prosecute degree mill providers.	X	X	X	X	
Urge employers to become informed and use tools to authenticate credentials presented by prospective and current employers.	X	X		X	X
<b>Pursue Legal Action Against Degree Mills and Use of Fraudulent Credentials</b>					
	Government	Institution	QA Agency	HE Representative Group	Press
Encourage and assist with the development of laws in individual countries that make establishing, licensing and operating degree mills illegal.		X	X	X	
Work to make the use of counterfeit credentials for, e.g., obtaining or upgrading employment, illegal.		X	X	X	
Encourage prosecution of degree mill providers and knowing users of fraudulent credentials where appropriate.		X	X	X	
Legally protect the use of key higher education terms such “college,” “university” and “accreditation.”	X		X		
Urge action to discourage and eliminate “accreditation mills” or rogue providers of quality assurance developed by degree mills.		X	X	X	X
Encourage governments to develop immigration policies that protect against abuses associated with counterfeit credentials.		X		X	

**APPENDIX I**  
**MATRIX OF EFFECTIVE PRACTICES ARRAYED BY SECTOR/ACTOR**

<b>Focus on Cross-border Degree Mill Operation</b>					
	<b>Government</b>	<b>Institution</b>	<b>QA Agency</b>	<b>HE Representative Group</b>	<b>Press</b>
Establish cross-border agreements among countries to discourage degree mills such as those suggested in the UNESCO/OECD <i>Guidelines</i> (2005).		X	X	X	
Work with multi-national and regional organizations to enhance awareness of degree mills and provide tools to identify and discourage their use.	X	X	X	X	
Promote the use of the UNESCO <i>Portal</i> or entry point to all countries' legitimate higher education institutions and accreditation/quality assurance bodies.	X	X	X	X	X
Identify and share characteristics and practices of degree mills operating internationally.		X	X	X	X
Develop an international network for information and alerts about degree mill activity.	X	X		X	
Support legitimate and value-added examples of cross-border higher education, whether developed through regulation, incentives or partnerships.		X	X	X	

## **APPENDIX II**

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