

# CHAPTER 1

## THE PHENOMENON AND EVOLUTION OF DIPLOMA MILLS

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### 1.1 INTRODUCTION

The internationalisation of Higher Education, increased cooperation amongst universities, the growth of international mobility of students, researchers and teachers and the increasing alignment of national Higher Education systems at a European level have all contributed to the development of policies which are focused on the implementation of high quality organisational processes in European higher education systems, as well as to increase the level of implementation of a learning outcomes approach to higher education.

Achieving high quality education and research capabilities in higher education implies putting in place considerable quality assurance and quality improvement activities, both internally within universities and at an external level. In addition, accreditation procedures have to be implemented, both at programme and institution level, which allow the programmes and institutions to be measured against defined and accepted standards and indicators.

At international level, two main legislative principles need to be considered:

- a. The concept of Higher Education as a *common good* brings into existence a context in which State universities operate side-by-side with private institutions, which are officially recognised in the country of reference. This is a common model of higher education provision in continental European countries. The quality of the education provided is guaranteed to citizens via the quality assurance procedures in place at accredited institutions and by the legal value of the qualifications awarded in the national Higher Education system in question.

- b. Higher Education systems which are focused on the independence of the academic community and where the outcomes of Higher Education are conceived as the free expression of the civil society. The countries which conform to this model - for instance, the USA and Anglo-Saxon countries - are generally not strongly regulated by national legislative frameworks. In such systems, national programme outlines do not exist nor are there a State examination system to verify the knowledge and skills of prospective professionals. In such systems, the quality of institutions and academic qualifications is managed by different forms of accreditation within the country.

Both of the systems highlighted above present potential 'grey areas' that can be exploited by institutions that claim to be higher education institutions but which in practice evade all methods of control, including accreditation and quality assurance procedures. Often, such institutions are auto-referential institutions, which exploit the great freedom that modern countries grant to science, research and education. Such institutions often define themselves as "non- traditional institutions" in order to avoid peer review. They represent borderline provision in the Higher Education system and often operate in the area of life long and distance learning.

Upon closer examination, it is possible to identify three different sets of bad practices, which characterise irregular and low-quality higher education available in today's market:

- The falsification of the academic content of the qualification and the consequent alteration of the final titles.
- The uncertainty regarding the identity of transnational institutions and their tendency to avoid regular monitoring, accreditation and evaluation visits, as well as the consequent punishment.
- The forgery of academic curricula and qualifications.

#### *Lack of minimal quality standards*

The "diplomas" awarded by non-accredited and irregular universities have not been officially authorised or approved, nor have they been double-checked after being issued, therefore they pollute the education market through forgery. The qualification awarded, which is often a close copy of the official national qualifications, conceals fully auto-referential issuing procedures. The formal layout of the underlying curriculum hides obscure processes of discipline replacement, insertion of low-quality educational content or, in some cases, even the absolute absence of content. In the international academic *jargon*, the institutions producing diplomas without any quality are defined "degree mills" and they award "bogus diplomas".

Steward and Spille defined a "degree mill" as "a person or organisation selling or awarding academic qualifications, which are not supported by an adequate scientific knowledge base or which are not bounded to demonstrate the achievement of a certain level of knowledge."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> In 1988, the American researchers, David W. Stewart and Henry A. Spille, studied on behalf of the American Council of Education the extension of the phenomenon of 'non-traditional education'. Their book (*Diploma Mills: Degree of fraud*, Macmillan Publishing Company, 866 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10022, 1988) became quickly popular and was considered as a sort of Bible in the field. Some American States consulted it in order to draft control regulations on private and non-accredited colleges.

### *Escaping control*

Nowadays, two major phenomena exist, which invalidate the traditional quality assurance and monitoring procedures applied in the Higher Education sector:

- “De-localised education”: the location where education is provided does not coincide with the actual, geographical seat of the institution which issues the qualification. The internationalisation of Higher Education has increased the practice of institutions forming affiliations including offshore provision, as well as franchised institutions. These are new types of institutional models, which, in associated literature, go under the name of “transnational education”. The phenomenon of transnational education is not an utterly negative one, since, in principle, it does represent an actual enrichment of the degree programmes offered, providing a meaningful opportunity for institutions to collaborate and work together, to engage with other institutions, as well as to increase their competitiveness. On the other hand however, the model can be exploited to provide low or zero quality degree programmes and qualifications in foreign markets, which are awarded by institutions with their headquarters and archives located abroad, far from the risk of undergoing quality assurance investigation, or the scrutiny of fiscal inquiries or police investigations.
- The second phenomenon is open and distance education. In this case, the programmes are normally provided on-line or via information technology and they exploit the numerous possibilities offered by advanced IT solutions. E-learning plays a leading role in re-modelling the field of Higher Education. As discussed earlier, also in this scenario, programmes and qualifications flourish which have low or no quality and they do not undergo regular accreditation or quality evaluation. These are frequently awarded by institutions whose seats are difficult to trace. Students enrol on-line, on websites which are impossible to locate and which evade quality assurance.

### *Qualification forgery*

A third area to be taken into account is the production and commercialisation of utterly fake or partially counterfeit qualifications. In the former case, thanks to digital technologies, fake credentials are identical to genuine ones; in the latter, qualifications usually are characterised by altered institutional logo and signatures, counterfeit exam transcripts and curricular details and are accompanied by a fraudulent legalisation of the submitted documents.

Recently, this phenomenon has grown to assume frightening dimensions in Russia, where hundreds of agencies sell fake qualifications on the Internet, which mainly belong to the old Soviet education system. The innovation process that Russian institutions have undergone over the last few years has fostered the diffusion of this phenomenon. Its most evident consequence was the elimination or the conversion of traditional Higher Education institutions. This brought about the dispersion of the old archives and the circulation of official higher education documents in the underground market. The migration waves towards Western European countries have probably been deeply affected by this trend, since a considerable number of qualified Russian technicians have entered Western Europe over recent years. In this

context, the task of evaluating such qualifications appears to be a very delicate one, given the little knowledge and information that is available regarding the Russian education system, due to the long-lasting isolation between the two blocks.

South American credentials represent a further source of concern for Western European qualification evaluators. Over the last few years, qualifications originating from South American have become more widespread in Europe because of the sharp increase in people emigrating from there to Europe. Also in this case, the evaluation is particularly delicate because, on the one hand, the existence of a South American counterfeiting industry has long been known and demonstrated; on the other, many South American qualifications also award the licence to practice a regulated profession.

### **1.2 DIPLOMA & ACCREDITATION MILLS: SOME DEFINITIONS**

Degree or diploma mills are independent/private institutions, which are not officially recognised in the national Higher Education system of reference. They award academic qualifications with a very short turnaround (usually from seven days to a few months) upon payment of very high sums of money, sometimes without even requiring candidates to sit examinations or attend structured courses. The Webster's Third New International Dictionary gives the following definition of a diploma mill<sup>4</sup>: "An institution of higher education operating without supervision of a State or a professional agency and granting diplomas which are either fraudulent or, because of the lack of proper standards, worthless".

There is a wide range of institutions operating in this sector: from actual fake institutions or agencies, which reproduce or counterfeit genuine qualifications, to non-accredited institutions, which carry out training activities but are not recognised by any Higher Education system. In addition, there are loophole institutions set up to look as if they have the legal right to award degrees without breaking the law (See § 5.3).

Apart from a few exceptions, the majority of countries have put in place a set of rules for accreditation of Higher Education institutions, as well as for the recognition of the qualifications awarded, which generally indicate the features and the minimal quality requirements that official institutions must meet. Generally speaking, qualifications awarded by institutions, which do not belong to the official Higher Education system of a country, are not eligible for recognition in any other country. Nonetheless, this assumption does not necessarily imply that all institutions that are not officially recognised actually pursue fraudulent goals.

It is worth noting that:

- a. In many countries it is possible to set up private institutions which provide teaching and learning services in Higher Education which are not accredited. In some cases the education provided by such institutions is of a high quality;
- b. Higher Education systems are not homogeneous and
- c. From country to country, the rules for recognition and accreditation of institutions are based on different legislative frameworks.

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<sup>4</sup>State of Oregon Office for Degree Authorization: [http://www.osac.state.or.us/oda/diploma\\_mill.html](http://www.osac.state.or.us/oda/diploma_mill.html)

Therefore, it is quite easy to understand how fake and non-accredited institutions can easily position themselves in a market which is everything but clear and regulated.

The majority of irregular institutions in the education market thrive in those national Education systems where the legal value of the academic qualification does not exist and where institutions are accredited by private agencies recognised by the Government and not by actual legislation<sup>5</sup>.

Finally, "accreditation mills" are also in operation in the education market. Accreditation mills are non-accredited agencies, which grant accreditation to bogus Higher Education institutions in order to help them look legitimate. This type of accreditation does not confer any valid status on bogus qualifications, it is only used by the degree mills as a decoy to attract potential customers (See § 3.2.).

### 1.3 A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The history of medieval university education in Europe is not exempt from a few bewildering episodes of academic dishonesty and trickery with regard to the prestige of universities and institutions and of the quality of programmes. A malicious reading of those incidents could bring to mind daring similarities with recent events with regard to bogus institutions.

The historian Leo Moulin writes that in the XV century, the number of European universities doubled. The number of institutions became so high that it caused difficulties for incumbent universities, such as the University of Paris. The increased competition in the higher education market was causing a reduction of student numbers at the established universities. So much so that a missive addressed to the Pope was sent out from the Sorbonne, with the request to him to stop granting papal privileges for the foundation of universities. Meanwhile, also some poorer students, belonging to the lower social classes, started attending university and sometimes they struggled to pay enrolment costs. The quest to enrol new students (and to obtain their associated fees) caused a considerable decrease in the quality of the selection procedures, alongside the suspension of admission examinations and the practice of selling qualifications to the highest bidder. The progressive decline in the quality of academic qualifications caused widespread dissatisfaction, which became a general feature of the XVII century<sup>6</sup>.

Thriving in a system of free competition, medieval universities devised advertisement and marketing techniques to increase their popularity. They used all available means, in particular financial ones, to attract students and professors or to persuade them to leave the university they currently belonged to. At the same time, the academic authorities took steps to prevent students and professors from moving or abandoning their studies; which would have caused disastrous migration and jeopardised the studium. So, for example, they obliged newly graduated *dottori* to swear that they would not abandon immediately their institution of origin (*Alma*

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<sup>5</sup> Let us just consider the United States, where the problem of the degree mills is endemic because of the characteristics of the accreditation system and of the job market. It is therefore not surprising that the highest number of publication and the most significant governmental measures have been taken in this country.

<sup>6</sup> L. Moulin, *La vita degli studenti nel medioevo*, Milano, 1992, pag.187.

*Mater*). In 1217, the University of Bologna ruled that anybody who would be caught "plotting" a transfer of their *studium* to a city other than Bologna, would be condemned to perpetual exile and all their possessions would be confiscated (*bona publicentur*). Nonetheless, in 1321, the above-mentioned threat was not enough to prevent students and masters from leaving Bologna. Many details of the demanding and subtle negotiations, which were undergone at that time to facilitate the movement from one institution to another, are known. For instance, in Padua all the desirable privileges were granted, such as: the accreditation of all exams passed at the university of origin; the achieved diploma was considered valid, the rector could carry weapons, and so on.

In 1444, the Senate of Venice declared void the academic qualifications obtained in Padua, which at the time was regarded as the Oxford of the Venetian aristocracy. In the XV century, the University of Avignon lost two thirds, if not even three fourths, of law students because of the devastating epidemics and of the wars, but also and mostly - as the chronicler says - because of the unfair competition of a number of "degree mills", where a group of smart "graduates" (*dottori*) distributed or sold qualifications, without even running programmes. In the same way, in 1491, the University of Padua accused the universities of Ferrara, Parma and Piacenza to have signed an agreement (*fedus*) against Padua and to be selling (*venalia*) the degree of master (*magistralia insignia*) at a very low price (*obolo*). If a rival institution was in crisis, universities never hesitated to attract students by means of advertisement. Below, an extract from a "leaflet" distributed by the University of Toulouse is reported: "Our country is a promised land, where milk and honey flow and the fields are always fertile and lush. It is a country rich in fruit trees *Ubi Bacchus regant in vineis, ubi Ceres imperat in arvis*. The air is healthier than in any other region, everything is low-priced, tranquillity and safety reign in the city and the full freedom of teaching is granted".

Students usually received from their *Alma Mater* some credentials (*litterae credentiales*) – the precursor of the present Diploma Supplement – which certified that they had completed a regular academic curriculum and listed the exams they had passed. It was the awarding university, which made the difference. Two years in any university corresponded to nothing more than one year in Paris. The teaching licence (*licentia docendi*) awarded in Paris, Bologna and Salerno had universal value: it allowed its holders to teach «in all places of the globe» (*ubique locorum ac per universum terrarum orbem*), which did not happen with licences issued by other universities. However, in 1255, Pope Alexander IV, upon request of the King of Castile y León, granted the graduates of the University of Salamanca the licence to teach in any university (*in quolibet generali studio*), except in those of Paris and Bologna.

In the Middle Ages, academic qualifications were organised on three levels: the baccalaureate, the licence and the doctorate. While the fees for the final exams to achieve the first two qualifications were quite reasonable, fees for the third one, called *convetus* - the public ceremony held to award the title of *doctor* – were very high. On the occasion of the ceremony, parades were organised, the university was decorated, rich banquets were offered and it was expected to reward almost all participants with presents and donations, particularly professors. It was estimated,

that the cost of a degree ceremony was equal to the expenses that a student had to cover for four or five years at university. This was the reason why, at the time, the greatest majority of students preferred not to get a doctorate, but to obtain just a *licentia*, which granted access to the highest social classes, both in the public sector and in the private professions. Nonetheless, such qualification did not entitle them to become professors; therefore they could not teach or become members of the doctoral colleges (*collegia doctorali*).

There are also cases of students, who upon obtaining their licence at a prestigious university, such as Bologna, then decided to obtain the doctoral qualification in minor and cheaper universities, such as Siena or Perugia and, in later years, also Ferrara (founded in 1391), if not even in Cesena (founded in 1570). The latter was well known for awarding degrees very easily and for its low prices: it was mockingly defined "the university of the two hams"<sup>7</sup>.

Finally, there was a further shortcut to obtain the title of *doctor*, i.e. to bypass regular examinations, through a papal edict, called *bullā* or *breve*, which could be obtained by submitting a plea. This system dated back to the XIV century and was firstly adopted by the Pope, but it was later imitated by the Empire, even if only to a limited extend.

It was introduced in order to help poor students (*scholares pauperes*) to cover the expenses for the final examination. As a matter of fact, such aid measure turned into "degree mills" of sorts; issuing titles that enjoyed little recognition in the academic world of the time, since the expression *doctor bullatus* was used to define an almost idiot graduate<sup>8</sup>.

Crossing the Atlantic Ocean, we find that the renowned American Higher Education system is not exempt from occasional episodes of dishonesty and also in this part of the world, the degree mills are everything but a recent phenomenon. At the end of XIX century, the growing demand for Higher Education caused an increase in the foundation of new universities and colleges, which was accompanied by a parallel growth in the number of fraudulent institutions.

The first record of a degree mill dates back to 1876. In the last century, regulations were put in place which granted the possibility of obtaining academic qualifications to the veterans of the Second World War and of the War in Korea. This enhanced the diffusion of bogus degrees.

At a certain point, they became so widespread that the Government passed a bill which obliged universities to comply with quality requirements defined by the recognised accreditation agencies. In fact the legal ruling that an institution must have access to federal funds to support students is still a prerequisite of official accreditation.

In summary, the objective of compulsory accreditation was, on the one hand, to contribute to the reduction in fraud in higher education qualifications; on the other, to contribute to the development of a new phenomenon, i.e. the creation of fake accreditation agencies or "accreditation mills".

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<sup>7</sup> A. I. Pini, "Scolari ricchi e scolari poveri tra Medioevo ed età moderna", in Gian Paolo Brizzi – Jaques Verger, *Le Università dell'Europa – Gli uomini e i luoghi – Secoli XII – XVIII*, Milano, 1993, pag.167.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 183.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall and of the iron curtain in 1989, the fake degrees market flourished in Eastern Europe as never before. In some cases, the rapid liberalisation of social structures had dramatic consequences on universities: traditional State funding was cut and they were forced to undergo privatisation. Some universities in Eastern Europe, driven by the need to survive, put in place programmes specifically targeting western students. These programmes often had very "loose" procedures to assess learning outcomes and the quality of final titles awarded was questionable. For a few years, the names of universities with seat in Rijeka, Niš, Odessa, Bucharest, and Krakow were advertised in Italy by agencies promising academic qualification issued by foreign state universities at very high cost but with low educational content.

#### **1.4 DEMAND ANALYSIS**

The phenomenon of bogus degrees would not be of endemic dimensions if it were not supported by a high demand for these types of titles and a high expenditure capacity.

Researchers have identified some specific social categories, which are more likely to be attracted by the phenomenon, since they might be the potential customers targeted by the advertisement of counterfeit diplomas.

The first ones are the so-called "mid-career adult professionals", i.e. executive and managerial staff working both in public administration and in private companies. For many of them, the achievement of an academic qualification is a prerequisite to access top-level positions in their field.

The option of returning to the traditional education system is often not appealing to the professionals. In some cases, the people in question interrupted or abandoned their studies in a traumatic way and they may be looking for forms of education tailored to the needs of their families and to the pace of their careers. Factors such as flexibility, independent management of learning time, little but intensive attendance, possibility to choose courses, application of acquired knowledge, recognition of prior learning and of the professional skills they have gained though the years may be important to them in obtaining their qualification. For this category of professionals, the manner in which non-accredited institutions award academic qualifications can become an irresistible temptation.

A second social group includes young people who have achieved only low-level school qualifications or who are not qualified at all. In order to be admitted in the public sector or to start a job with career prospects, they need to obtain school and professional qualifications, often in a very short time.

These people are attracted by the underground market of diploma mills because they offer both legal and illegal shortcuts to the achievement of the qualifications they need. In Italy, the falsification of school diplomas – punished by the Italian law as a crime – is only a phenomenon of limited dimensions and it concentrates, most of all, on the production of final High School diplomas, often in connection with private remedial schools for the recovery of lost school years.

A third social group is represented by people holding technical qualifications, which often work as freelancers, consultants or offer technical services. Some institutes and

agencies of transnational education, which exclusively target this segment of society, offer non-traditional methods to obtain advanced professional qualifications at academic level to these technicians. For instance, surveyors can become engineers, accountants can achieve a degree in economics and business management; dental technicians can become dental hygienist or dentists. The achievement of academic qualifications implies financial benefits and improves the external image of these professionals.

The fourth social group includes craftsmen, tradesmen and small entrepreneurs. These independent professionals - sometimes also defined "self-made men" - very often reach considerable professional success, both as far as their company and the profit they make are concerned. Many of them aspire to improving their image: both within their company, in the relationship with the other team members and with employees - who sometimes have higher level qualifications than their boss; and to the external world, i.e. suppliers, customers and public administration. They are particularly sensitive to the academic qualifications issued in non-traditional ways, to the *honoris causa* titles - as a form of formal recognition of their professional achievements. In addition they are generally attracted to programmes which do not comprise formal traditional attendance and recognise their prior learning.

A fifth group is made up of students, who failed entrance examinations for degree programmes with *numerus clausus* (dentistry, medicine and surgery, technical health professions, nursing and rehabilitation) or candidates who failed the State exam to obtain the licence for a regulated profession, in particular, trainee lawyers. The offer of "alternative routes", often transnational programmes, which grant access to such professions are very popular among the representatives of this group, since they exploit the combination of emotions felt by this group, such as frustration and ambition.

A sixth group is represented by people who practice new, emerging professions, which are normally not yet recognised nor regulated. Professions in this category include *Heilpraktiker*, osteopath, art-therapist, financial consultant, optometrist and all professions related to natural medicine. The loopholes or absence of legislation and regulations in these professions foster a potential market for the achievement of transnational or foreign qualification, with a view to having the qualification recognised in another country.

The last category comprises so-called "qualification hunters", i.e. people that for personal ambition or to promote their external image, enjoy collecting academic and honorific qualifications coming from different sources.

### **1.5 THE SOCIAL DAMAGE**

The level of social emergency caused by low or zero quality Higher Education is rising and it is fostered by the growing internationalisation of universities and by the increasing popularity of transnational education.

Bogus qualifications issued by non-accredited institutions are a source of considerable problems and they are detrimental to numerous social groups and to the institutions themselves.

The following are the stakeholders that can be adversely affected:

- a. Students, who unconsciously invest their time and their money to achieve qualifications that only look valid, but that are actually bogus and cannot be recognised or used in any meaningful way;
- b. Employers who might select employees on the basis of bogus academic and professional qualifications. As a consequence, they run the risk of hiring non-qualified people in key positions within their companies and potentially damaging their business. In addition, human resources and career plans might suffer under inefficient management which may have an adverse effect on the company image;
- c. Non-recognised institutions expose "genuine" universities to unfair competition on the market and their presence could damage high-quality institutions. In addition, each national Higher Education system suffers as a result of a loss of credibility at international level, caused by the over-diffusion of non-qualified institutions and of academic corruption.

The strategies put in place to fight illegality or targeted at containing the phenomenon of bogus qualification and their potential damage attract wide social and academic interest.