

CHAPTER 3

HOW TO SPOT BOGUS INSTITUTIONS

The most straightforward way to check the status of an institution is to browse through the official lists of accredited institutions in the country where the institution claims to be based. Without doubt, one of the major information sources is the ENIC-NARIC website (www.enic-naric.net). The website offers information on 55 different countries; there is a dedicated 'country profile' page for each country, which is powered and updated by the centres of the country of reference. The majority of country profiles contain a list of recognised higher education institutions.

In cases where the institution which is being researched does not appear in any official list of the country of reference or if the country only published lists referring to certain types of higher education institutions, it is also possible to check the IAU database or the other lists compiled by the other international organisations that contribute to spread information about Higher Education (See Chapter 2 Bogus institutions: a census of sources).

The third possibility is to identify the most common features of a suspect institution. To this purpose, the *Council for Higher Education Accreditation* (CHEA – www.chea.org) published a checklist to understand and evaluate the risk factors. In the present work, the list has been expanded and reshuffled. In the following section, twenty questions will be listed in order to facilitate the identification of the accreditation status of institutions. If the answer to one or more of the following questions is “yes”, the institution under consideration might be an irregular one. Nonetheless, it is necessary to point out that irregular institutions pursue different goals and not all of them go under the label of “diploma mills”.

3.1 CHECKLIST TO SPOT DIPLOMA MILLS

1. Can degrees be purchased or ordered?
2. Is there a claim of accreditation when there is no evidence of this status?
3. Is accreditation/recognition information over-emphasised?
4. Is little, if any, attendance required to students, either online or in class?
5. Does the awarded qualification belong to the Education Systems of different countries?
6. Are only a few assignments required for students to earn credits?
7. Is a very short period of time required to earn a degree or, in any case, the time required is short in comparison with the prescribed duration of the course?
8. Does the organisation declare to be recognised worldwide?
9. Does the organisation define its status as “global”, “worldwide” or “international”?
10. Are the degrees granted based solely on previous experience or resume review?
11. Does the institution grant *honoris causa* qualifications?
12. Are there few and easy requirements for graduation?
13. Are tuition fees too high or too low in comparison with current standards?
14. Does the organisation fail to provide any information about a campus or business location or address and rely, e.g., only on a post office box?
15. Does the organisation fail to provide a list of its faculties and/or of its professors?
16. Does the organisation have a name similar to other well-known colleges and universities?
17. Does the organisation use qualification names that are used in a country different from the country where it operates?
18. Does the organisation claim not to grant any qualifications but to represent foreign recognised universities?
19. Is the Apostille indicated as a proof of institutional accreditation or of the validity of the qualification granted?
20. Does the organisation stress the fact that there is no need for accreditation?

Apart from the ones mentioned above, there are also other indicators that could warn potential clients of an irregular institution:

- a. The accrediting agencies are not regularly accredited;
- b. Among the requirements to obtain a qualification is the possession of a valid credit card;
- c. No previous qualifications or minimum entrance marks are required;
- d. The only requirements are the submission of a CV and a form of self-certification;
- e. The qualification is issued in very short time;
- f. All admin operations are on-line.

An irregular institution is very interested in keeping its clients satisfied and in "issuing" qualifications in the shortest possible time, without even checking the personal data provided by the client. This kind of institutions claims to grant qualifications exclusively on the basis of previously acquired work experience. As a matter of fact, in no Education System in the world is previously acquired work experience considered as a sufficient indicator to grant an academic qualification. There is no accredited institution, where admin operations are carried out exclusively on-line: if this was the case they could not be accredited or recognised. Finally, institutions claiming to be recognised or accredited by international organisations, such as UNESCO, are to be looked at with suspicion.

In order to understand if a qualification is "genuine" and therefore recognisable, sometimes it is not enough to take into account the recognition status of the institution in question. It is also necessary to double-check if the course and the type of qualification are official or accredited in the Education System of the country of reference.

In this respect, a good example, is represented by the case of France, where the *écoles supérieures* issue both qualifications recognised at national level (*diplôme visé*), and qualifications which could be defined typical of that kind of institution: This does not mean that they are irregular but simply that they are not official qualifications of the French Education System. They can still be used on the private job market.

3.2 CHECKLIST TO IDENTIFY ACCREDITATION MILLS

The US Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) has also published 10 questions to identify bogus accreditation agencies.

1. Does the organisation allow accredited status to be purchased?
2. Does the organisation publish lists of institutions or programs they claim to have accredited without those institutions and programs knowing that they are listed or have been accredited?

3. Are the accreditation fees different from the current ones?
4. Does the operation claim that it is recognised (by, e.g., USDE or CHEA) when it is not?
5. Are few if any standards for quality published by the organisation?
6. Is a very short period of time required to achieve accredited status?
7. Are accreditation reviews routinely confined to submitting documents and do not include site visits or interviews of key personnel by the accrediting organisation?
8. Is "permanent" accreditation granted without any requirement for subsequent periodic review, either by an external body or by the organisation itself?
9. Does the operation use organisational names similar to recognised accrediting organisations?
10. Are "special offers" or accreditation discounts advertised?