

# INTRODUCTION

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The phenomenon of bogus providers in higher education is nothing new, as the authors of this timely study demonstrate in their section on the historical overview of diploma mills and bogus accrediting bodies. But the problem actually goes far beyond the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the appendices to volume II of Rashdall's masterful work *The Universities of Europe in the Middle Ages* (Powicke and Emden, Oxford, rev. ed. 1936), there are listed some 23 establishments which various contemporary and later authorities claimed to be universities, but for which no adequate evidence existed.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Pope Alexander IV issued a Bull against the charter of the Cathedral of Reims in 1258 for falsely claiming exemption from residential requirements for attending the non-existent *studium generale* in that city when he was actually living in another country and claiming benefices there: The dean of the Reims cathedral chapter was forbidden to allow him to enjoy this subterfuge. And in another cited case, the Bishop of Albi excommunicated the entire town because of their false claim to have established a university - a decision which was reversed on appeal to the ecclesiastical court of the Archbishop of Bourges.<sup>2</sup> Thus already by the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> Century we have evidence that false claims of university privileges were extant, and also that the competent authorities were no more consistent in their approaches to the problem in that time than are their modern counterparts.

Given the sorry history of bogus providers and dubious (at best) claims on their behalf, the efforts of the late Twentieth and the Twenty-First Centuries need now to accomplish what has not succeeded for over 800 years - a concerted effort to combat fraudulent academic providers and their supporters, including the so-called quality assurance agencies that supposedly give them legitimacy.

It is a pleasure to be invited by my colleagues at CIMEA to write the introduction to this important volume, which as previously been published in Italian but is now available in an English version. The importance of this publication lies in its success, in less than 100 pages, in providing both an overview of the issue and practical ways to identify bogus providers and accrediting agencies. Many monographs and websites have provided practical information, but few if any have communicated to lay readers the reasons why these entities are threats, much less provided the fruits of research on them. The authors go further, by not only providing links and references to additional sources of information, but by selecting 50 important examples and providing well-researched and thoughtful snapshots of each case. Even a casual reader can discover from reading these snapshots how diploma mills

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<sup>1</sup> Hastings Rashdall, Vol. II, Appendix II: Alleged Universities at Lyons, Reims, Alais, Parma, etc., pp. 325-341.

<sup>2</sup> Rashdall, *ibid.*, pp. 332 and 335.

and accreditation mills mimic the mission of legitimate entities, going just far enough to deceive with their borrowed names and fake web-based information while remaining outside the reach of prosecutors and aggrieved victims in all but a few instances.

The authors have drawn upon cases and evidence from around the world, and their careful presentation clearly shows that the phenomenon is not confined to any country or education system. Indeed, the evidence presented here shows that diploma and accreditation mills lie and deceive about their locations and ownership as much as they do about everything else. And if they are kicked out of one jurisdiction, or required to stop using one website or name or degree programme, they simply chose another. Diploma and accreditation mills are in some cases not only multinational corporations, but also "multi-campus systems". Legal efforts to combat this scourge are often handicapped by the very factors that are the strengths of democratic societies: respect for privacy, limitations on free speech and activity; restrictions on how the state may interfere with private citizens' affairs; the tradition of the judiciary staying away from academic matters; and strong evidentiary requirements before a case can be made against a person or organization. In many situations, fraud has been hard to prove in a legal proceeding, and bogus entities have often become the price paid for allowing freedom, much as hate speech and intolerance have often been the price that societies pay for laws promoting free expression. As the authors point out, the situation is slowly changing, and both individual countries and international organizations are beginning to coordinate their efforts and adopt stronger measures. But the process will take time, and must ensure that legitimate providers and quality assurance agencies can be successfully distinguished from bogus operations.

The European Network of Information Centres (ENIC Network), of which I am privileged to be the president in 2009-2011, has been concerned with bogus operations since its inception in the late 1980s. Following the ratification of the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC) in 1997, the ENICs (joined now by the National Academic Recognition Information Centre Network (NARIC Network) related to the European Union and European Economic Area) have developed and approved several subsidiary texts to the LRC that address the problems of diploma mills and accreditation mills, either specifically or in connection with other issues such as transnational education. These documents are publicly available on the ENIC-NARIC website at <http://www.enic-naric.net/>. The 56 Member States of the Networks are united in their strenuous opposition to diploma mills and accreditation mills. At the same time, we are all equally concerned to get good information into public hands so that no one need be victimized by these entities. The European Union, the Council of Europe, and UNESCO are equally concerned about this issue.

For all these reasons, I and my colleagues in the ENIC and NARIC Networks, and the Secretariats of the sponsoring organizations, applaud the translation of this useful monograph into a language that will enable it to reach a global audience. Our Italian colleagues are to be congratulated for their good work. This writer would only hope that more translations might be made available in future, and that students, faculty, educational advisors, school personnel, government officials, political leaders and employers - as well as the general public - will give its contents the attention it deserves.

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