

***Doing a Background Check on Your Performers: Foreign
Education Document Alteration and Diploma Mills***

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IL ACRAO, October 27 – 29, 2004



DOING A BRACKGROUND CHECK ON YOUR PERFORMERS: FOREIGN EDUCATION DOCUMENT ALTERATION AND DIPLOMA MILLS

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Contents:

1. What is a “diploma mill”? What do we mean by “bogus credentials”?
 2. Why are diploma mills a problem? Who is the victim?
 3. How do diploma mills operate?
 4. What makes a U.S. institution or degree program “legitimate”?
 5. What makes an educational institution outside of the U.S. “legitimate”?
 6. How can you identify documents from international diploma mills?
- Resources and References
Appendix: “Genealogy” of some diploma mills; sample credentials.

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1. What is a “diploma mill”? What do we mean by “bogus credentials”?

- A. A diploma or degree mill is an organization or individual producing and selling diplomas, degrees, transcripts, or other academic records that are meant to give the impression of academic achievement, but in reality represent little or no study.
- B. Documents from a diploma or degree mill may bear the names of entities that are not officially-recognized educational institutions, or may be fraudulent misrepresentations of documents issued by legitimate institutions. Note that organizations may claim to be selling bogus credentials as “fantasy”, “novelty”, or “replacement” degrees.
- C. Such credentials are “bogus” – “fakes” that give a false impression of academic achievement.

2. Why are diploma mills a problem? Who is the victim?

- A. Diploma mills and bogus “universities” exist because of the high value placed on academic credentials in the workplace. Diploma mills are a problem because they and purchasers who use bogus degrees to misrepresent themselves perpetrate fraud.
- B. The victims of diploma mill fraud include, among others:
 - 1. Legitimate higher education institutions that offer authentic educational programs and experiences.
 - 2. Legitimate higher education institutions whose diplomas and transcripts are imitated and sold as authentic, or with the intention to deceive.
 - 3. Employers who do not request verification of applicants’ or employees’ credentials; holders of legitimate higher education credentials who compete with purchasers of bogus degrees for employment and promotions.
 - 4. Taxpayers, whose tax monies support federal and state financial aid programs in which bogus institutions can participate (until they are found out).
 - 5. The public, who is protected by the licensing or certification of practitioners in many professions – accounting, allied health professions, architecture, dentistry, engineering, medicine, nursing, pharmacy, psychology, teaching, veterinary medicine, etc.
- C. **Applicants for teacher certification do submit documents from diploma mills.**

3. How do diploma mills operate?

- A. Diploma mills operate in many of the same ways that other fraud operations work – by imitating legitimate activity. Some diploma mill rings are involved in selling other types of fraudulent documents, such as driver’s licenses, passports and other identity documents. See *FTC Targets Sellers Who Deceptively Marketed International Driver’s Permits Over the Internet and via Spam*: <http://www.ftc.gov/opa/2003/01/idpfinal.htm>

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B. Diploma mills exploit:

1. The current market demand for academic credentials.
People whose academic background is not commensurate with their work experience and/or skill level, who started but never completed a degree program; who need a specific credential or specific level of credential to be competitive in the workplace; who want or need to have a “degree” for whatever reason.
See *HDS Official Obtained Ph.D. from Diploma Mill*:
http://www.washingtontechnology.com/news/1_1/daily_news/20849-1.html
2. Advertising venues such as newspapers and magazines read by their potential customer base. Ads can be found in the US and around the world, in well-respected publications as well as popular tabloids and even comic books.
3. Electronic media such as Internet, email, digital methods of producing documentation, etc. The Internet has made worldwide distribution easy and cheap.
4. Laws and legal loopholes in physical locations worldwide. They move around – the U.S. and the world - to avoid legal trouble, and/or set up various parts of their operations in different countries so as to make legal prosecution difficult. Possible spheres of prosecution include bank fraud, mail fraud, laws pertaining to education.
 - i. Some U.S. states, such as Hawaii, are known as havens for diploma mills because of weak laws on education. See *State Dominates the \$200 million quick-degree industry*, Pacific Business News, May 26, 2000 -
<http://www.bizjournals.com/pacific/stories/2000/05/29/focus1.html?t>
 - ii. The State of Oregon regulates the establishment and recognition of educational entities closely. See the Oregon Office of Degree Authorization Web site - <http://www.osac.state.or.us/oda/index.html>
 - iii. Countries with well-known diploma mill operations: Switzerland (certain cantons), some Caribbean nations, Liberia, Romania.
5. The names and reputations of legitimate, quality higher education institutions, such as variations on “Oxford”, “Cambridge”, “Berkeley”, “Stanford”, or “traditional-sounding” “British” names, such as the Parkwood University “family” – see page A.
6. Standards of good practice in legitimate higher education.
 - i. Use “legitimate-sounding” language to describe their activity – but really only sell bogus documents.
 - ii. Describe themselves with wording like “internationally recognized”, “fully accredited”, “affiliated with.....”, “accredited by.....”, “verification services available....” Some create their own accreditation and verification services.
 - iii. Produce documents on the same type of safety paper that legitimate institutions use for transcripts, use “official-looking” stamps and seals.

4. What makes a U.S. institution or degree program “legitimate”?

- A. The U.S. has no federal governmental body that controls the establishment and quality of higher education institutions. Legislation on the establishment and operation of educational institutions varies from state to state.

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- B. Quality control is conducted through the process known as “accreditation”, a non-governmental, independent, on-going peer review process that is voluntary on the part of the institutions. Accreditation is not mandatory, it is voluntary. Institutions or programs choose to participate in the accreditation process. Accreditation is available at ALL levels of education.
 - 1. *Regional or national* accreditation – accreditation of the institution as a whole
 - 2. *Professional or program* accreditation – accreditation of individual curricula / program offered by the institution. The process focuses on just one Department, program or curriculum.
- C. Two organizations in the U.S. approve accrediting agencies:
 - 1. Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), formerly COPA and CORPA, an institutional membership organization that defines quality standards for accreditation - http://www.chea.org/public_info/index.cfm - and
 - 2. U.S. Department of Education, which reviews accrediting agencies for purposes related to federal financial support - <http://www.ed.gov/admins/finaid/accred/index.html>
- D. General practice in the U.S:
 - 1. *regionally-accredited* institutions only accept degrees and transfer credit from other regionally-accredited institutions. Institutions that are accredited by agencies that are NOT approved by the U.S. Department of Education or CHEA are NOT regarded as “accredited” institutions by regionally-accredited institutions.
 - 2. *licensing or certification* in a profession requires an academic credential from a program with the *appropriate professional accreditation*.

5. What makes an educational institution outside of the U.S. “legitimate”?

- A. In the U.S., the evaluation and recognition of educational achievements from other countries is not regulated by laws or governmental agreements.
 - 1. There is no organization in the U.S. that operates in an “official” capacity to make degree recognition or transfer credit agreements with other countries. Educational institutions, employers, professional licensing boards, etc. in the U.S. are free to interpret foreign educational credentials as they see fit.
- B. In many countries, education is regulated by law, often at the national level, sometimes at a regional or district level. Governments supervise education and are responsible for the establishment, funding, operation and administration of educational institutions. In these countries, publicly-financed institutions established by law, or private institutions that have the same legal standing as public institutions, are “officially recognized” institutions.
- C. When interpreting the status of an institution outside of the U.S., evaluators review the institution’s legal recognition status within its own educational system. In most cases where there is a legitimate body in the country that is responsible for education, if the institution is recognized by the appropriate legitimate educational authority in its own location, according to its legal and quality assessment systems for institutions offering *bona fide* academic awards, then the status may be interpreted as comparable to U.S. regional accreditation.
- D. Most countries do not have a system of “professional” accreditation by program of study.

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6. How can you identify documents from international diploma mills?

- A. Educate yourself and your staff about the problem of diploma mills, including identifying and collecting reliable sources of information on legitimate educational institutions. Do not rely on “lists” of schools, but rather learn how to do the research necessary to determine the status of educational institutions, whether in or outside of the U.S.
- B. Establish a standard approach to reviewing and evaluating the materials submitted by your applicants who have both U.S. and foreign education. See *A Practical Guide to Documentation Review and Verification in International Admissions*, Ann M. Koenig and Jane Yahr Shepard, AACRAO *College and University*, Vo. 77, No. 4, Spring 2002.
- C. Include a verification procedure in the evaluation process, using reliable resources. This procedure may involve various levels of verification, from confirming the accreditation status of the institution by using standard reliable resources, to requesting authentication of the documents directly from the issuing institution if discrepancies or questions arise.
- D. Establish a procedure for follow-up if inauthentic or bogus documents are submitted.

International Credential Document Verification

- Know your educational systems
- Compare biographical data (date of birth, name, sex) on all documents to make sure everything belongs to the person whose application you are reviewing.
- Review the self-reported educational history / ladder with the documents received to determine whether anything is missing.
- Is the chronology of education completed logical, both in terms of the system and the age of the applicant.
- Identify the name of institution and does it exist? Did it exist at the time of the award?
- Who recognizes the institution? Is it from an entity you will accept?
- Does the program exist? The degree awarded?
- Make sure that the document you are reviewing conforms with previously reviewed documents from the same country and what your resources indicate they would look like.

What to look for

- Are there any erasures, typeface inconsistency, white-out, lines on an angle, stains, burns.
- Records stamped as ‘confidential’ or ‘not to be released to student’ that are submitted to your office directly from the student.
- Paper size and type.
- Do the courses follow that country’s or institution’s syllabi or does it mirror U.S. programs. Of study?
- Copies of documents presented and the originals have been ‘lost.’
- Incorrect spelling of words
- Absurdly high grades
- Uncharacteristic looking document for the institution or system of education in question
- Portions of lines, word, etc. missing
- Small back specks around document of photocopied documents.
- Is the transcript an ‘American’ style format?
- ‘Royal Fabrication’
- Photograph

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**Suggested Steps in Working with Foreign Language
Documents and Translations**

- *Know what language the institution will issue documents in.
- *Require applicants to submit original language documents and certified literal English translations when the educational documents are in a language other than English.
- *Compare the English translation with the original language document.
For example: A grade of '89' from China on a Chinese language document should be translated as '89,' not a letter grade of 'A' or 'B.' Or, the grade of '5' from the former Soviet Union is a '5' in English, not an 'A.'
- *Documents from Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Philippines, Thailand, Canada (other than Quebec), Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Egypt, Israel, Oman, Bahrain, UAE are issued in English.
- *Do not rely on 'official' translations as confirmation of accuracy. This goes the same for notary copies.
- *Identify key words in native language to confirm accuracy of the translation. Work with the original language document, using the translation as a map to assist you in 'finding your way.'
- *Use a dictionary and other resources. Build a reference library.
- *Use staff with foreign language fluency to cross-check accuracy of translations.
- *Have a list of respectable translation services available if need for a student.

Resources and References

The Regional Accrediting Associations in the United States

Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools - <http://www.msache.org/>

New England Association of Schools and Colleges - <http://www.neasc.org/>

North Central Association of Colleges and Schools –

<http://www.ncahigherlearningcommission.org/>

Northwest Association of Schools, Colleges and Universities - <http://www.nwccu.org/>

Southern Association of Colleges and Schools - <http://www.sacscoc.org/>

Western Association of Schools and Colleges - <http://www.wascweb.org/>

AACRAO Transcript Credit Practices Online – <http://www.aacrao.org> – Log in as AACRAO member; go to Publications and click on 'Transfer Credit Practices (TCP) Online.'

Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA)

http://www.chea.org/public_info/index.cfm

U.S. Department of Education – <http://www.ed.gov/admins/finaid/accred/index.html>

General Overview of the Problem of Diploma Mills

Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA): <http://www.chea.org>

Fact Sheet # 6: Important Questions about "Diploma Mills" and "Accreditation Mills"

<http://www.chea.org/Research/CHEA%20Fact%20Sheet%206%20Diploma%20Mills.pdf>

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Fraud, Abuse and Related Problems. U.S. Network for Education Information.
Information on accreditation, diploma mills, and misrepresentation in the U.S. system of education.
<http://www.ed.gov/offices/OUS/international/USNEI/us/accred-fraud.html>

By John Bear, Ph.D.

Degree.net, Dr. John Bear's Web site <http://www.degree.net> - Many articles and references on diploma mills. Also consumer-oriented discussions on accreditation, distance learning, etc.

Diploma Mills – The \$200 Million a Year Competitor You Didn't Know You Had, 2001.
http://www.degree.net/html/diploma_mills.html

Bear's Guide to Earning Degrees by Distance Learning, John Bear and Mariah Bear, Ten Speed Press, Berkeley CA, 2003 – and other *Bear's Guides* - Order directly from the publisher - <http://degree.net/books/bearsguide.htm>

By Allen Ezell, former FBI agent:

Transcript Fraud, presentation given at the AACRAO Annual Meeting, 2003.
http://www.aacrao.org/forms/uploadFiles/454C00000004.pdf.transcript_fraud.pdf

Diploma Mills—Past, Present, and Future, in AACRAO quarterly *College & University*, Winter 2002, Vol. 77, No. 3. Available online to AACRAO members:
http://www.aacrao.org/publications/members_only/winter2002.pdf

By George Gollin, Physics professor, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign:

Unconventional University Diplomas from Online Vendors or Fraud, Corruption and Scandal: Buying a Ph.D., August 2003. Overview of how diploma mills operate.
http://www.hep.uiuc.edu/home/g-gollin/diploma_mills.pdf

Information about Some Degree-Granting Institutions Not Recognized by CHEA-Recognized Organizations, extensive presentation with many links. August 2003.
<http://web.hep.uiuc.edu/home/g-gollin/pigeons/>

By Alan Contreras, Oregon, Office of Degree Authorization:

Diploma Mills. Oregon Student Assistance Commission, Office of Degree Authorization:
http://www.osac.state.or.us/oda/diploma_mill.html

A Case Study in Foreign Degree (Dis)approval, International Higher Education, Summer 2003, Center for Higher Education, Boston College
http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/avp/soe/cihe/newsletter/News32/text004.htm

International Diploma Mills Grow with the Internet, International Higher Education, No 24, Summer 2001 - http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/avp/soe/cihe/newsletter/News24/text003.htm

How Reliable is National Approval of University Degrees?, International Higher Education, No 29, Fall 2002 - http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/avp/soe/cihe/newsletter/News29/text005.htm

From Other Sources:

Degree duplicity by Mark Clayton, *The Christian Science Monitor*, June 10, 2003

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<http://www.csmonitor.com/2003/0610/p15s02-lehl.html>

United States Government Accounting Office Purchases of Degrees from Diploma Mills
<http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d03269r.pdf>

Fake School Reveals Holes in Loan Program, CNN.com
<http://www.cnn.com/2003/EDUCATION/01/21/fictitious.school.ap/>

Chairman Collins: Loophole Allows Taxpayer Dollars to Pay for Federal Workers' Diploma Mill Degrees. Urges Office of Personnel Management to Issue Regulations.
http://www.senate.gov/~gov_affairs/072503presssc2.htm

INSTITUTIONS OUTSIDE OF THE U.S. – A selected list of resources

Directories of institutions:

Commonwealth Universities Yearbook, Association of Commonwealth Universities
World Higher Education Database (WHED), International Association of Universities -
<http://www.unesco.org/iau/whed.html>
International Handbook of Universities (predecessor to the WHED)
World List of Universities and Other Institutions of Higher Education

Country / region print publications:

AACRAO International Publications – including AACRAO International Education Series,
Country Guide Series, World Education Series, and PIER workshop reports -
<http://www.aacrao.org/publications/catalog/international.htm>
Country Education Profiles published by Australian Education International of the National
Office of Overseas Skills Recognition (AEI-NOOSR) -
<http://aei.dest.gov.au/AEI/QualificationsRecognition/CountryEducationProfiles/default.htm>
A Guide to Educational Systems Around the World, NAFSA – <http://www.nafsa.org>
ECE Presents series, Educational Credential Evaluators, Inc. – <http://www.ece.org>
The New Country Index, International Education Research Foundation – <http://www.ierf.org>

Online resources:

European ENIC-NARIC Network - <http://www.enic-naric.net/>
Governments on the Web (for links to ministries of education) -
<http://www.gksoft.com/govt/en/>
Ministries of Education, UNESCO -
<http://www.unesco.org/education/partners/mined/mined.htm>
NAFSA ADSEC Resources - <http://www.adsec.nafsa.org/>
ADSEC-OSEAS Link - http://www.bibl.u-szeged.hu/oseas_adsec/sources.htm
U.S. Department of State Educational Advising Centers -
<http://educationusa.state.gov/centers.htm>