

Subject	External Quality Assurance
Module	External Quality Assurance Agencies Emerging Challenges
Topic	5.3 Degree Mills and Accreditation Mills

This text version is for your personal study only. Reproduction and/or redistribution is not allowed.

Please note that this is a text-only version. All links and animations are not activated in this version. It is recommended that you view the topic online for an interactive learning experience.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction
2. Fraud in the Higher Education Market
3. Identifying Degree Mills
4. Who Are the Customers?
5. What Is the Damage?
6. Discussion
7. Degree Mills and Accreditation
8. Online Diploma Mills
9. Accreditation Mills
10. Discussion
11. Guardians
12. Summary

1. Introduction



This topic discusses the growth of 'degree (diploma) mills' that market bogus or sub-standard qualifications and the emergence of 'accreditation mills' that certify these degree mills. You will learn about the damages caused by this trend and ways to spot and curb the growth of degree and accreditation mills. The topic also provides a useful list of red flags that can help you to identify substandard online education providers or diploma mills.

Objectives: Degree and Accreditation Mills

Upon completion of this topic, you should be able to

- define 'degree mills' and 'accreditation mills'
- identify ways to recognise degree mills
- identify the likely customers for fake degrees
- describe the damaging consequences of degree mills
- identify the reasons why some institutions don't seek accreditation
- identify measures to curb the growth of degree and accreditation mills
- identify the 10 warning signals that a school or supposed university is a diploma mill

2. Fraud in the Higher Education Market

There is good evidence that degree qualifications assist in social mobility and result in both personal and public benefit. Benefits include access to certain positions, promotion, higher pay, and social prestige, to name but a few. With the potential for social mobility comes a demand for higher education and that feeds a lucrative market for higher education providers. As we see in other businesses, the higher education market has been affected by fraudulent enterprises that exploit the

Subject	External Quality Assurance
Module	External Quality Assurance Agencies Emerging Challenges
Topic	5.3 Degree Mills and Accreditation Mills

consumers' needs. One of the undesirable elements in higher education that capitalises on growing demand is the 'degree mill', 'diploma mill' or 'bogus institution' that sells degrees for less than the legitimate cost of a degree program in return for much less study than would be appropriate for such a qualification.

Degree certificates, testamurs or credentials that HEIs issue to graduates are treated as evidence of acquired knowledge or competencies. The degree certificates are accepted by stakeholders such as the government and employers based on the trust they place in HEIs. When this trust is undermined by the presence of substandard higher education providers, it also undermines the value of credentials offered by legitimate providers. The bogus institutions have come to be known as 'degree mills' that issue degree certificates much like a factory that churns out wood chips or breakfast cereal. The requirements are so far below minimal norms that the unwary customer pays far too much for no more or less than a piece of paper.

3. Identifying Degree Mills

It is not easy to develop a straightforward checklist to identify degree mills and there is no incontrovertible definition of their features. There is a spectrum of activities, from clearly fraudulent to borderline questionable. At the one extreme, there are the degree testamurs for sale – effectively pieces of printed paper – and there are organisations that require the candidate to supply some information. The meaning of a “testamur” can vary; in some countries it only says that the student was present and may have enrolled in certain courses – without confirmation of completion or grades. Some degree mills require some written work or perhaps a small amount of study. Finally, there are institutions that simply do not satisfy current educational norms for the level of academic achievement relative to the 'qualifications' issued.

UNESCO describes degree mills as questionable providers of higher education, typically offering degrees and other credentials that are costly and involve little in the way of robust educational experience. This is especially the case with electronically delivered degrees, which are largely unregulated and pose a serious problem in many countries. While reliable, comprehensive data are not available, it is estimated that thousands of degree mills operate worldwide. The growing demand for at least some higher education continues to nourish the market for bogus providers. It seems that few governments or organisations are positioned, or possibly willing, to take the necessary steps to educate the public or to regulate these enterprises.

The number and diversity of degree mills suggest that it is not always easy to spot them although there are clues that will help to identify activities that are not legitimate.

- If you come across advertisements that offer a degree for a price with little description of the academic soundness of the program or study duration, most likely they involve degree mills.
- Many internet advertisements and e-mail offers are about selling degree certificates with no need to fulfil any academic requirements. An examination of these certificates may help in identifying the fraudulent operations.
- Some certificates have an invented institution name, which is intended to look good when framed and hung on a wall. Sometimes the advertisement contains a disclaimer to say that 'this is only for fun', but this is deceitful as such a certificate can be presented to an unwary employer to gain a promotion or salary increase. Other certificates come with the name of, but not with the authority of, a genuine university, and this is clearly fraud. Universities have a number of ways to address this, including validation

Subject	External Quality Assurance
Module	External Quality Assurance Agencies Emerging Challenges
Topic	5.3 Degree Mills and Accreditation Mills

- services (anyone can ask whether a particular certificate in a person's name is genuine) and printing of degree certificates on non-reproducible paper.
- Institutions with a history and a good reputation tend to attract more interest from the public and the bogus providers capitalise on this. They often claim partnership with well-known institutions while the actual partnership may be with a substandard provider with a similar name, which is not apparent to the local population in another country. For example, an average person might not detect minor differences in the spelling of names and variations in the names themselves such as Columbus University and Columbia University, or New Castle University and Newcastle University.
 - Apart from variations on the name of a reputable institution, some degree mills make false claims about affiliation with highly-reputable bodies. For example, UNESCO has spotted degree mills that use UNESCO's name or logo in advertising their affiliation. The UNESCO website provides a cautionary note that

"any provider of higher education or accrediting agency which claims or gives the impression of being accredited and/or recognised by UNESCO should be looked upon with caution. Such institutions or accrediting agencies may use different fraudulent modes."

- Similarly, a bogus provider may claim some sort of recognition by a state or provincial government. This is quite rare in the U.S. and does not constitute legitimate accreditation. Governments normally don't accredit; they leave that to a recognized agency. A bogus provider might assert that its diploma is recognized by a professional or trade association -- which has no authority to grant accreditation.

A particular institution was set up in an Australian state where there were clear policies on institutions operating without accreditation, but no provision for pursuing or prosecuting offenders. That gap was rectified, but this particular institution continued to pop up all around the world, claiming an Australian connection. Because Australia is regarded positively in terms of the quality of its higher education, this could have created an opening for such an institution. The following information details how local institutions use the name of reputed universities in a foreign country to gain credibility.



[What's In a Name?](#)

What's In a Name?

Queries over UK degrees offered in Kenya, Kenya Business Daily Africa, February 28, 2008.

.... It is now emerging that parents, guardians and self-sponsored students in Kenya could be losing millions of shillings in fees and other charges in the belief that they would get certificates from two famous UK universities — Cambridge and Oxford — through a correspondent relationship with the Digital Advisory Learning Centre (DALC).

The centre, which has eight campuses across the country with a high concentration in Nairobi, claims to offer diploma and degree certification from the two universities but the reality is different.

Subject	External Quality Assurance
Module	External Quality Assurance Agencies Emerging Challenges
Topic	5.3 Degree Mills and Accreditation Mills

DALC collaborates with two institutions in the UK — Cambridge Association of Managers and Oxford Association of Management — which run two separate colleges offering management courses but which have no working relationship with either Cambridge or Oxford Universities.

...To pass off as a partner of Oxford and Cambridge Universities, Irish International University used to rent facilities for graduation at Oxford or Cambridge universities.

To project a pseudo image of 'legitimacy', some degree mills declare that they look at an applicant's life experiences to award a degree but there would be very little scrutiny of the skills acquired via life experiences. Genuine institutions also have clear policies and procedures for evaluating what learners have already acquired. A major part of such procedures pertains to documentation that demonstrates the validity and currency of prior learning and its relevance to a given program.

Contrary to the rigorous approach of the genuine institutions, the procedure of a degree mill may only be an invitation to potential customers to write a list of previous activities and experiences. Sometimes there is a slogan: "you may already have a degree and not know it." "You don't have to take lectures. We attach importance to life experience"; "We offer doctorates to those who have more than three years of work career"; and "No Books. No Courses. No Studying. Degrees Based on What You Already Know," are the other variants. Sometimes a personal essay is required on a familiar subject, such as one's life experience. A certificate provided on this basis is not entirely null, but is not much different from a fake certificate. The bottom line is that it is intended to deceive.

Since most degree mills are Internet-based, there may be no attendance requirement at all. Advertisements that claim that one can earn a degree in a week clearly indicate that the degree cannot be from a reputable institution. The dubious operations usually do not provide information about a campus or business location or address, listing only a post office box. Often the 'red flag' is that there are few, if any, assignments for students to earn credits, or visible requirements for graduation. This is unfair to the legitimate degree holders who spend years to earn degrees.

Some degree mills could be seen to be genuine but are of such low quality that they fall outside the norms of the system in which they are located. One example is Greenwich University (not the English one) that relocated from Hawaii (where it had been unable to obtain US accreditation) to an Australian island (where it slipped under the radar). When the Australian government established review panels to investigate the institution, they found that a Greenwich degree was roughly the first year of a three-year Australian degree – genuine, at a exceedingly low standard. The Australian rules were eventually tightened to remove the loophole that permitted Greenwich to operate.

Some degree mills promise flexibility in course duration to suit the customer's convenience, whatever that may be. However, the length of study may be totally out of line with legitimate norms. Flexibility in course duration and pace of learning is a salient feature of distance-learning programs, and with technological developments, more and more legitimate institutions are offering flexible Internet-based studies. The problem with the dubious providers lies in an intentional and inappropriate claim of flexibility.

Many organisations are taking actions to control and eliminate fraudulent providers. The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) urges all US states to take

Subject	External Quality Assurance
Module	External Quality Assurance Agencies Emerging Challenges
Topic	5.3 Degree Mills and Accreditation Mills

action, as needed, to discourage and ultimately eliminate fraudulent providers of higher education. The CHEA has listed sets of questions to enable the user to identify degree mills. The questions recommended by CHEA are detailed in the information below. If the answer to more than a few of these questions is 'yes', it suggests that the operation under consideration may be a diploma mill.



[Questions to Ask to Identify a Degree Mill](#)

Questions to Ask to Identify a Degree Mill

- Can degrees be purchased for an unusually low price?
- Is accreditation claimed when there is no evidence of this status?
- Is there a claim of accreditation from a questionable accrediting organisation?
- Does the operation lack state or federal licensure or authority to operate?
- Is little or no attendance required of students, either online or in class?
- Are only a few assignments required for students to earn credit?
- Is a very short period of time required to earn a degree?
- Are degrees available solely on experience or resume review, and is there a charge for each academic credit granted?
- Are there only a few requirements for graduation?
- Does the operation fail to provide information about a campus or business location or address and use only on a post office box?
- Does the operation fail to provide a list of its faculty and their qualifications?
- Does the operation have a name similar to other well-known colleges and universities?
- Does the operation make published claims for which there is no evidence or way to verify them?

4. Who Are the Customers?

Some individuals are **mised** by degree mills into believing that the degree they earn will have some value. They sign up with an online company, pay thousands of dollars in tuition, buy books and complete simple assignments, only to find out later that their degrees are worthless. By the time that they realise what has happened, the bogus provider might have changed location or contact details or has limited contact to e-mail or a postal box. Degree mills are like Prometheus, constantly changing their form. In the internet environment, a degree mill can simply abandon one website and creates another.

Alas, there are individuals who **want** easy degrees and will knowingly patronize a diploma mill. With a few keystrokes, and perhaps some trivial assignments, they can do in a few days something that takes others years to accomplish. In 2008, a journalist from the Toronto Star tried out the scam and got his degree after typing a short description of life experiences and paying a fee for the certificate. Along with the degree, he received a transcript with grades for classes he never took. The temptation to become an 'instant graduate' is essential to the lively trade in bogus degree certificates.

A 2008 report from the U.S. General Accounting Office exposed 463 federal employees with degrees from institutions believed to be diploma mills. Johnson (2006) who investigated this and similar reports argues that employers are partially

Subject	External Quality Assurance
Module	External Quality Assurance Agencies Emerging Challenges
Topic	5.3 Degree Mills and Accreditation Mills

responsible for the fake degree demand. Employers prefer graduates to non-graduates and many rely too much on degree certificates as proof of job qualifications. The author explains that:

"...faced with a diminishing pool of well-paying jobs and fearing their employers are unfairly holding them back, some workers pretend to have earned degrees, purchasing them to obtain coveted jobs or promotions".

The degree mill is a world-wide phenomenon, as detailed in the information below:



[Degree Mills – a Global Issue](#)

Degree Mills – a Global Issue

- Diploma mills in the Philippines have been placed in a spotlight recently after 13 officers from the South Korean army were sacked and prosecuted for faking Filipino university degrees. ABS-CBN, November 3, 2007.
- The government of Liberia has insisted that it will not waver in its quest to close down all bogus universities operating in the country. The Informer, October 24, 2007.
- In Korea, the prosecution is investigating 20 professors who allegedly obtained their doctoral degrees from foreign unaccredited universities and used those records to get their jobs. The Korea Times, August 28, 2007.
- In Bangladesh, the education ministry has asked the University Grants Commission to sue West Coast University of Panama for offering bachelor's courses without official permission. New Age Metro, April 17, 2007.
- After being turned out of Malaysia for being neither Irish nor a university, the Internet-based Irish International University of Europa is showering Cambodian political leaders with degrees and establishing an "Asian campus" in Phnom Penh. Asia Sentinel, December 12, 2006.

5. What Is the Damage?

A loss of public trust in degree certificates is the immediate visible damage caused by degree mills. Fake degree certificates not only reduce the value of degrees but can be harmful to public safety. Fraudulent credentials and fake certificates in areas such as health, engineering, law and justice can cause serious problems to public safety and welfare. Investigative journalists have found that anyone with a bank card for electronic transfer of money can obtain degrees from degree mills. In one instance, the media reported that a lawyer, a police chief and his dog all got degrees in criminal justice from a bogus provider. Of course, the police chief paid for his dog with the intention to investigate the fraud. The information below provides some more examples.



[Public Safety and Welfare Under Threat...](#)

Subject	External Quality Assurance
Module	External Quality Assurance Agencies Emerging Challenges
Topic	5.3 Degree Mills and Accreditation Mills

Public Safety and Welfare Under Threat...

Buyers of bogus degrees named (Washington Spokesman-Review, July 30, 2008)
 One diploma mill that went by the name St. Regis University was discovered by federal authorities in US and shut down in 2005, but not before it had sold fake diplomas to 9612 purchasers, including ones claiming to be from the University of Missouri. Of the 9,612 purchasers, 826 bought at least one Ph.D. and 41 bought two doctorates. Some of those doctorates were awarded in health-related fields, including at least two naturopathic doctorates, two doctorates in naturopathic medicine, one Ph.D. in medicine and one 'medical' Ph.D....

A bogus forensic psychologist who supplied evidence in hundreds of court cases has been jailed for five years, BBC News, United Kingdom, February 22, 2007.

700 court cases thrown into doubt by fraudster, Yorkshire (U.K.) Post, February 22, 2007.

...Firms of solicitors hired him to work on the defence of their clients – paid for by the taxpayer... ... (He) gave evidence in cases involving armed robbery, rape, death by dangerous driving, unexplained death and drugs offences.

The huge amount of money that goes into the tuition or purchase price for fake certificates is another problem. The newspapers and government legal staff reported, after one crackdown on degree mills, that the money involved ran well into the millions. For example, in the case of St. Regis University the papers reported that degrees had been sold for \$7.3 million dollars. It is one thing when the bogus degree prompts a pay increase, but this amounts to fraud upon taxpayers when the bogus degree is used by a public employee.



[Unfair Use of Public Money...](#)

Unfair Use of Public Money...

- A Houston County educator was overpaid by about \$50,000 over a 10-year period based on his questionable doctorate, according to an internal investigation... Educators are paid according to their years of experience and highest degree level obtained. To get credit for the degrees, they must come from a university or college accredited by Alabama Dothan Eagle, December 17, 2008
- The United Nations fired a staff member in November because his academic degrees turned out to come from a well-known Internet diploma mill, not a legitimate university, a U.N. official said Friday. International Herald Tribune, February 9, 2007
- 14 employees of the Fire Department of New York bought phony diplomas over the Internet and submitted them to the city in an attempt to meet educational requirements for being promoted or hired, according to a report released yesterday by the Department of Investigation. The New York Times, February 1, 2007

Subject	External Quality Assurance
Module	External Quality Assurance Agencies Emerging Challenges
Topic	5.3 Degree Mills and Accreditation Mills

6. Discussion

Discussion: Degree Mills

- What kind of degree mill operations have you observed in your country?
- Who are the customers for fake degrees in your country? Has anything been done to keep people from patronising the degree mills?
- What damage have degree mills caused in your own country?
- What are the factors that make it possible for degree mills to operate in your national higher education sector?
- How could these undesirable practices be spotted and eliminated by the government or organisations? Where does the responsibility lie?

7. Degree Mills and Accreditation

When in doubt, accreditation status helps to separate the wheat from the chaff.

Consumer protection is one purpose of accreditation, where the 'consumer' is not only the student, but also those who supply operational funding to the institution and aid to the student. Add to all that the people who make use of the services of the institution, its staff, or graduates. Most HEIs submit to an accreditation process (even if it is not legally compelled) to obtain an independent confirmation of their quality and standards.

However, it cannot be assumed that even legitimate institutions will pursue accreditation. There are some institutions that are, or consider themselves to be, so superior or unique in approach that they do not believe any QA agencies can judge them appropriately – so they ignore accreditation. Such was the case until recently with distance learning institutions, as the frameworks used by accreditors were conceived in terms of face-to-face education.

Some institutions have an elite clientele that, by custom, understands and is satisfied with what the provider does, without validation by a third party. In this situation, the consumer protection role may be unnecessary. In certain cases, an institution may not need funding for itself or its students, and may choose to forego accreditation. It should be noted, however, that failure to engage in an independent external review process means that the institution misses other benefits of a well-implemented external review, such as a clearer focus on quality and external advice on quality improvement.

Apart from these examples, some institutions choose not to seek accreditation because they are of substandard quality. Degree mills fall into this misbegotten category. They can predict the future and know that they will flunk any legitimate review for accreditation.

Therefore, the advice to prospective students, employers and other stakeholders in systems where accreditation is the norm (whether compulsory or voluntary), when an institution or program is not accredited, is to ask 'why not?' The student should be very clear whether it is because the institution is a priori superb or wildly innovative, or simply cannot get accreditation from much too conservative accreditors.

Interestingly, as governments started insisting on accreditation, and as public awareness about accreditation increased, the destructively creative degree mills created yet another new problem – accreditation mills.

Subject	External Quality Assurance
Module	External Quality Assurance Agencies Emerging Challenges
Topic	5.3 Degree Mills and Accreditation Mills

8. Online Diploma Mills

GetEducated.com lists 10 red flags that indicate a possible diploma mill:

- The institution in question is not accredited.
- The institution in question is accredited ... but NOT by a recognised agency... The majority of Internet degree mills are "accredited." Problem is they are accredited by bogus agencies that they themselves have created. These bogus accrediting agencies often have prestigious sounding names.
- Admission criteria consist entirely of possession of valid Visa or MasterCard. Previous academic record, grade point average, and test scores are deemed irrelevant.
- You are offered a college degree based on a "review" of your faxed resume. Credit for career experience is a valid option at many universities that deal with adult learners. However, the process of evaluating career experience for college credit is complex. No valid distance learning university in the USA will award a graduate degree (Master's or Doctorate) based solely on a review of career experience. Undergraduate programs are more flexible. Accredited undergraduate programs typically limit credit for experience to a maximum of 10 courses or 30 semester credits. (One year of a four-year degree) One notable exception is Thomas Edison State College of New Jersey. This publicly funded distance learning university makes it possible for adult learners, in theory, to earn Associate or Bachelor degrees entirely through career portfolios, military and corporate training, and challenge exams.
- You are promised a diploma within 30 days of application regardless of your status upon entry. Degree mills are in the business of selling paper. Ergo, they'll get that piece of paper to you as quickly as possible.
- You are promised a degree in exchange for a lump sum – typically \$2,000 for an undergraduate degree, \$3,000 for a graduate degree. Universities do not commonly charge flat fees. They typically charge per credit or per course tuition and fees.
- Your prospective online university has multiple complaints on file with the Better Business Bureau. The BBB records consumer complaints about online degree mills.
- Your online 'admission counsellor' assures you that online universities can't be accredited by CHEA recognised agencies. This is a lie.
- The school's Web site either lists no faculty or lists faculty who have attended schools accredited by bogus agencies.
- The university offers online degrees almost exclusively to United States citizens but is conveniently located in a foreign country, quite often a tiny nation that lacks any system of academic accreditation. Don't be fooled by online degree and diploma mills. Many maintain impressive web sites. All of them advertise heavily online. Look beyond flashy graphics for the name of the school's accreditation agency. Take the time to verify accreditation by an agency that is recognised by the Council on Higher Education Accreditation.

In conclusion, it is abundantly clear that keeping track of degree mills and accreditation mills is a major challenge. Their operators are nimble and flexible and will move between virtual and physical locations as their operations are recognised for what they are. There is no easy solution and the transnational reach of the mills suggest it is necessary to take a collaborative and information-sharing approach with colleagues across the globe.

Subject	External Quality Assurance
Module	External Quality Assurance Agencies Emerging Challenges
Topic	5.3 Degree Mills and Accreditation Mills

9. Accreditation Mills

When degree mills became a problem in countries such as the US, regulations on accreditation were tightened. Only students who enrolled in institutions accredited by a body duly approved by the US government could secure public financial support. In addition, employers would support the further studies of their employees only in accredited institutions.

However, as regulations tightened, degree mills found ways to slip through the regulations. To escape the accreditation requirement they created bogus accrediting organisations or joined hands with a bogus accreditation agency that would sell accreditation for a price. These bogus accreditation agencies have come to be known as 'accreditation mills'. The reason this works is that the term 'accreditation' is not protected in law, so any entity can claim to be an accrediting agency. For example, the Cambridge Association of Managers and the Oxford Association of Management mentioned before claimed they were accredited by a Quality Assurance Commission (QAC) based in UK. Investigation revealed however that QAC was not recognised by the UK education authorities. It was a company owned by a Malaysian businessman. It is a typical example of an accreditation mill.

More commonly, the bogus agency is not set up by a single degree mill (an accrediting agency with a single accretee would look suspicious) but by a group of entities that purport to provide education. There have been at least two such agencies in existence for some years, one in the USA and one in Australia. These are widely known, and their 'accreditation' is discounted.

Technological developments make the tracking of the degree mills and accreditation mills very difficult. By the time they can be spotted by regulators, they would be ready to change their faces and start business in some other part of the world. CHEA has listed a set of questions that will guide the user to identify the accreditation mills.

10. Discussion

Discussion: Accreditation Mills

1. Browse the [Council for Higher Education Accreditation \(CHEA\)](#) website and locate the set of questions listed by CHEA to identify the accreditation mills.
 - o Relate each of those questions to a national context other than the US and analyse whether these questions are relevant.
 - o What adaptations would you suggest to make them suitable to that context?
2. Browse the [GetEducated.com](#) website and read the Top 10 Red Flags to identify the Online Diploma Mills. In what ways do you find them to differ from or align with the questions of CHEA? Explain.

11. Guardians

Given that there are bogus accreditation bodies as well as degree mills, the question arises as to who is responsible for endorsing/authorising accrediting agencies. Some national agencies (such as AUQA, Australia; CONEAU, Argentina; Akkreditierungsrat, Germany, US Department of Education and CHEA, USA) are involved in this supervision.

Subject	External Quality Assurance
Module	External Quality Assurance Agencies Emerging Challenges
Topic	5.3 Degree Mills and Accreditation Mills

Legislation to control degree mills is being tightened in the USA, and some success has recently been report in prosecutions even under previous legislation. Some states take a laissez-faire attitude, but some (notably Oregon) have been most assiduous in their attention to fraudulent claims. After a lot of debate, the law to control degree mills was finally passed on August 14, 2008. It is now a crime to use fake degrees for jobs or promotions. Canada has no law specific to degree forgery and the forgery section of the Criminal Code covers degree forgery as well.

In other parts of the world, there are patchy laws and regulations for the institutions that have a physical presence in the country. The fact that most degree mills operate on the Internet can make state laws less reliable, due to the difficulty of pinpointing their location. It also makes detection of the responsible individuals difficult.



[Combating Diploma Mills](#)

Combating Diploma Mills

Excerpts from the Law (US)

"(20) DIPLOMA MILL.—The term 'diploma mill' means an entity that—

"(A)(i) offers, for a fee, degrees, diplomas, or certificates, that may be used to represent to the general public that the individual possessing such a degree, diploma, or certificate has completed a program of postsecondary education or training; and

"(ii) requires such individual to complete little or no education or coursework to obtain such degree, diploma, or certificate; and

"(B) lacks accreditation by an accrediting agency or association that is recognised as an accrediting agency or association of institutions of higher education (as such term is defined in section 102) by—

"(i) the Secretary pursuant to subpart 2 of part H of title IV; or

"(ii) a Federal agency, State government, or other organisation or association that recognises accrediting agencies or associations.

Ministry of Advanced Education, British Columbia, Canada closes and/or sanctions institutions

...Under the terms of this injunction, Vancouver University Worldwide is restrained from granting or conferring a degree or from selling or offering for sale or advertising for sale, a diploma, certificate, document or other material that implies the granting or conferring of a degree in British Columbia.

Nigeria: 15 Illegal Varsities Operate-NUC, Stella Eze, Nigeria, Leadership Nigeria, May 6, 2008.

National Universities Commission (NUC) has alerted the public on the operations of 15 illegal universities located in different states of the federation.The commission, in a statement contained in its Monday bulletin, dissociated itself from the aforementioned institutions, warning that their activities have been reported to the police for further action.

Subject	External Quality Assurance
Module	External Quality Assurance Agencies Emerging Challenges
Topic	5.3 Degree Mills and Accreditation Mills

There is no complete list of degree mills as they appear fast and beyond the control of any government. However, quite a few websites provide alerts, lists of bogus institutions and agencies and tips on how to recognise and track them down. In US, states such as California, Oregon and Minnesota, maintain websites about these mills. Some states, including Oregon and Michigan, provide specific lists of non-accredited schools and non-approved accrediting organisations. The University Grants Commission of India, the Government of UK, the Australian Government, French government and the National Universities Commission (NUC) of Nigeria are among the others that alert the public to degree mills. The Boston College Center for International Higher Education maintains a Higher Education Corruption Monitor that provides links to useful resource on degree mills.

Professor George Gollin from the University of Illinois provides plenty of useful information concerning unaccredited degree-granting institutions and useful tools for internet investigations in his home page. The media news provided as information in this topic has been taken from the vast compilation of media articles he has made available. GetEducated.com provides a list of some unaccredited accreditation agencies in addition to tips on how to recognise a diploma mill. Quackwatch is a non-profit corporation whose main purpose is to combat health-related frauds, myths, fads and fallacies. The website also provides a list of unaccredited institutions of higher education and unaccredited accreditation agencies.

Coming from the other direction, one way to control degree mills is to provide the public with better information about recognised institutions. To respond to this need, UNESCO has developed a portal of HEIs with links to information on HEIs recognised or otherwise sanctioned by competent authorities in participating countries. The country information on this portal is managed and updated by relevant authorities in participating countries. The UNESCO website also provides guidelines to students in their search for the program of study.

There is a meeting of state officials in the USA that shares information about degree mills that have been closed down, but then sprung up elsewhere. UNESCO, INQAAHE and CHEA are working to set up a more comprehensive monitoring scheme. This will include an augmentation of UNESCO's 'portal' of validated institutions, some authentication of testamurs, and a monitoring of accreditation mills (by INQAAHE). The Australian government maintains a list of organisations that are believed to be suspect. INQAAHE, as a network of bona fide QA agencies, provides information on suspect ones. AUQA maintains a watching brief on all internet references that purport to have an Australian connection, and seeks to have the connection deleted. This is not necessarily simple, and government legal departments can take the view that, although the situation is technically illegal, the chances of a successful prosecution are low.

When the Toronto Star investigation uncovered an operation that sold authentic-looking degrees and sealed transcripts for institutions including York University and the University of Toronto (Toronto Star, 7 Dec, 2008), the universities decided to take action to undo the damage. The University of Toronto introduced a system where employers and other interested parties could request online verification of any University of Toronto degree, if they know the student's name, social insurance number or student number. They will get an answer in five days. York University is considering a similar move. The information below details some snippets from media news on actions taken to curb degree mills.



[Some Snippets from the Media](#)

Subject	External Quality Assurance
Module	External Quality Assurance Agencies Emerging Challenges
Topic	5.3 Degree Mills and Accreditation Mills

Some Snippets from the Media

Fake college boss sent to prison (UK, BBC News at Six, December 11, 2008)

A man who ran a bogus college in a £16m fraud that involved 80,000 students has been jailed for seven years.

Phony degrees catch up to buyers, Canada Toronto Star, December 13, 2008

Fourteen New York firefighters were fined more than \$135,000 after they submitted bogus degrees from St. Regis in attempts to gain promotions.

Judge sentences Hamilton U. owner, Star-Tribune, October 28, 2008

The owner of an unaccredited online university that drew attention to Wyoming as a haven for such schools was sentenced Tuesday to two years in prison for tax fraud.

.....

U.S. District Judge William Downes sentenced Marn in Casper to two years in prison and a year of supervised probation. Downes also ordered Marn to pay \$618,937 in restitution to the IRS, according to IRS spokesman Bryan Thiel.

Diploma mill crackdown drives some from state, Alabama, Tuscaloosa News, October 10, 2008

Since Alabama has cracked down on questionable for-profit schools:

- Five institutions have been denied state licenses to open in Alabama
- Four had licenses revoked
- 21 did not have licenses renewed
- One closed

Diploma mill co-conspirator nets 3-year jail term, Spokesman-Review, August 6, 2008

12. Summary

This topic covered the following main points:

- The demand for higher education provides a lucrative market for the higher education business, which has resulted in some fraudulent business practices by bogus providers.
- Degree mills are questionable providers of higher education, typically offering degrees and other credentials that are costly and involve little in the way of robust educational experience.
- Degree mills use a variety of ways to project an image of legitimacy, such as using variations of the names of reputed institutions as partners and making false claims about their affiliation with reputed bodies.
- On one hand, there are individuals who unsuspectingly invest in degrees provided by bogus institutions to receive worthless certificates. On the other hand, there are individuals deliberately choose these mills for an easy degree.
- The damage caused by degree mills includes the following:
 - Erosion of public trust in degree certificates
 - Harm to public safety due to fake certificates to undeserving individuals
 - Financial repercussions due to spending on tuition or in the purchase of fake certificates
- Examples of institutions that do not seek accreditation include those that:

Subject	External Quality Assurance
Module	External Quality Assurance Agencies Emerging Challenges
Topic	5.3 Degree Mills and Accreditation Mills

- Do not believe an existing QA agency's parameters will be able to judge them appropriately.
- Have a targeted clientele, which is satisfied with what the provider does without this being validated by a third party.
- Are located in regions where accreditation is voluntary unless the institution wants to benefit from certain funding.
- Choose not to seek accreditation because they are of inadequate quality. Degree mills come under this category.
- With stricter regulations, degree mills created their own bogus accrediting organisations or joined hands with a bogus accreditation agency to escape the accreditation requirement.
- The following are some measures being taken to control degree and accreditation mills:
 - Some national accreditation bodies are involved in authorising accrediting agencies.
 - Legislation to control degree mills is being tightened in the US.
 - UNESCO has developed a portal of HEIs to enable the public to have access to information about recognised institutions.
 - UNESCO, INQAAHE and CHEA are working to set up a more comprehensive monitoring scheme.