

# Degree Mills: non-accredited and irregular higher education institutions

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The so-called 'diploma mills' or 'degree mills' are independent institutions which operate without recognition by the national systems of higher education. Upon payment of consistent fees, they unlawfully award academic degrees within short periods of time – from seven days to a few months – with no need to pass any kind of exam or to follow a structured academic path.<sup>1</sup>

The existing terminology refers both to degrees and institutions as 'non-recognized', 'non-recognizable', 'non-accredited', 'fake' or 'bogus'.

The spectrum of the institutions that operate in this field is wide and varied: there are institutions that are actually fake, as well as agencies that copy or counterfeit original diplomas and degrees and 'non-accredited' institutions that carry out educational activities and grant degrees which are not officially recognized by any educational system.

Notwithstanding a few exceptions, each country has drafted their own guidelines for the accreditation of both higher education institutions and of degrees they issue, by listing all requirements that are to be met in order to be granted accreditation.

Academic titles and qualifications awarded by a 'non-accredited' institution are not entitled for recognition in any other foreign country. Nonetheless, this does not imply that all institutions that are not recognized by the Government are bogus.

It is indeed necessary to consider a few factors to understand the place of 'non-accredited' and fake institutions in the frame of national higher education systems. First of all, in many countries it is possible to create private institutions that manage education services – that in some cases even reach excellent levels; secondly, higher education systems worldwide are not homogeneous and, finally, the guidelines for the lawful recognition of institutions and their accreditation are based on different legislative systems.

The majority of fake institutions on the market conceive themselves as belonging to the national higher education systems, where degrees have no legal value or where institutions are accredited by private agencies recognized by the government and not by a specific law.

Finally, accreditation mills are also worth mentioning: they are agencies that, without any recognition, award accreditation to higher education institutions, in order to grant them some kind of legal recognition. The accreditation they award is absolutely useless for the recognition of academic titles but it is used by the diploma mills, as a sort of trick to attract students.

## 1. Irregular institutions: checking the sources

Countries tend to adopt different strategies to spot 'non-recognized' institutions active in their territory:

- lists are available of all accredited and recognized institutions in a specific country, as well as of the courses they offer;
- lists are available of institutions and academic titles that cannot obtain any kind of recognition, in some cases diploma mills are also included.

Even though the lists mentioned in the first point are compiled according to different methods, the type of information they present is the same in all cases, at least in line of principle; while there are

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<sup>1</sup> The definition of *diploma mills* taken from the *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*: “An institution of higher education operating without supervision of a state or professional agency and granting diplomas which are either fraudulent or because of the lack of proper standards worthless”.

only a few countries that have published lists of 'non-accredited' or 'non-recognized' institutions. Below, two of these cases will be examined:

- Italy: from 1988 to 1994, the Ministry of University and Research (*Ministero dell'Università e della Ricerca Scientifica e Tecnologica*) published three documents listing Italian and foreign institutions, whose degrees could not be recognized in Italy. Since 1994 the Ministry has not drafted this type of documents anymore and only information concerning recognized institutions has been published.
- United States: each State has its own regulations for the accreditation of universities and to fight the phenomenon of bogus institutions. Not all States publish information concerning 'non-accredited' or 'not-recognized' institutions.

International organizations have also addressed the issue of diploma mills in different ways: in some cases, institutions have been unveiled that claimed to be accredited by or to be somehow connected to international organizations; in some other occasions lists have been drafted and action has only been rarely taken in the most serious cases.

The most popular sources of information are the official lists drafted by the institutions in each country. They sometimes have the limit of showing only certain types of institutions, failing to offer an exhaustive overview of all those operating in the higher education sector.

Another popular source of information used to spot illegal institutions, is the archive of measures taken by the competition authorities that regulate the market, such as the Italian Antitrust Authority (*Autorità Garante della Concorrenza e del Mercato*) and the various foreign antitrust authorities. They have published a series of judgements about institutions that claim to grant valid academic titles but that, as a matter of fact, are not accredited nor recognized.

## 1.1 Italian Ministerial Circulars

In 1988, the former Ministry of Education published a circular<sup>2</sup> with the purpose to provide explanation about 'the activity of private institutions – some of them active in Italy too – that grant certificates or academic degrees that can not be recognized by the Italian higher education system.' This document lists 19 institutions, both Italian and foreign, that were and still are 'not-recognized' either in Italy or in their country of origin. During the following years, many of the above mentioned institutions have ceased their activities, sometimes after the intervention of the judicial authority; some others have instead continued operating, under different names.

In 1993, the Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research published another circular concerning the recognition of academic titles<sup>3</sup>. The document highlights that 'numerous private institutions with headquarters in Italy and abroad work in the higher education sector awarding academic degrees that they claim to be 'recognized' or 'recognizable' in Italy, in compliance with the provisions of art. 170 and 332 of Royal Decree n. 1592, of 31<sup>st</sup> August 1933, and with specific bilateral agreements.' Furthermore, the document advises Italian universities to request the specific documentation regarding foreign degrees at the diplomatic representations of each country – in particular to the embassies of Mexico, Ecuador and Jugoslavia, because 'in these countries some of the private 'non-accredited' institutions operate which are not entitled to award valid degrees.' 46 institutions are mentioned in the circular, some of which already included in the previous document

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<sup>2</sup> Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione - Direzione Generale Istruzione Universitaria, Divisione X; Circolare Ministeriale Prot. N. 1633 del 5 luglio 1988 – Ministry of Education – General Directorate for University Education, 10<sup>th</sup> Division, Ministerial Circular n. 1633 of 5<sup>th</sup> July 1988.

<sup>3</sup> Ministero dell'Università e della Ricerca Scientifica e Tecnologica - Dipartimento Istruzione Universitaria, Studenti stranieri; Circolare Ministeriale Prot. n. 1115 del 16 giugno 1993. - Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research – Department for University Education and Foreign Students, Ministerial Circular. 1115 of 16<sup>th</sup> July 1993.

- quoted a few times - which grant academic titles that can be recognized in Italy: in this case the number of institutions that are still active is higher in comparison to the circular of 1988.

The last circular was published a year later, in 1994<sup>4</sup>. It provided a further list of 'non-recognized' institutions, as an integration to the previous ones. The new institutions are 17 and the majority of them is still active.

## 1.2 Enic e Naric Networks

There are two international networks that connect high number of international information centres for the recognition of academic titles:

- The NARIC (*National Academic Recognition Information Centres*) network was created in 1984 by initiative of the European Commission in order to implement a decision taken by the European Council of the Ministers of Education, with the aim of connecting the national centres of each member state of the European Union and of other European countries;
- The ENIC (*European Network of national Information Centres on academic recognition and mobility*) network connects the national information centres nominated by the national authorities in the signatory countries of the European Cultural Convention promoted by the European Council, by the Region of Europe and by Unesco.

There is one website for both networks<sup>5</sup> through which it is possible to contact the national centres selecting the desired country. In addition to information regarding the national information centres for the recognition of foreign qualifications, there is also information about the national systems of higher education, lists of 'recognized' institutions, as well as recognition procedures for academic and professional qualifications.

## 1.3 The World Higher Education Database (WHED) of the International Association of Universities (IAU) and Unesco's recommendations

The World Higher Education Database is a very useful tool for checking if an institution is accredited within a certain higher education system. It is a database compiled by the International Association of Universities (IAU)<sup>6</sup>, an institutions created on the initiative of Unesco and closely related to it, with the aim of dealing with issues regarding higher education. The IAU database consists of descriptive profiles of higher education systems in about 180 countries worldwide, all drafted by the national official authorities of each country.

There is also the possibility to access another online database, a sort of appendix of the first one, which deals exclusively with university institutions, divided by countries<sup>7</sup>: it contains about 9.760 of them. All this information is available online or on a cd-rom which is updated every year and published by IAU. It is necessary to bear in mind that if an institution is not mentioned in the database, it does not imply that it is not recognized.

On Unesco's website a warning has also been published regarding all institutions that claim to be recognized by them, but which are actually not<sup>8</sup>. As Unesco make clear in their communiqué, they do not have the power to accredit any higher education institutions or agencies; as a consequence,

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<sup>4</sup> Ministero dell'Università e della Ricerca Scientifica e Tecnologica - Dipartimento Istruzione Universitaria, Studenti stranieri; Circolare Ministeriale Prot. n. 2796 del 27 ottobre 1994. - Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research – Department for University Education and Foreign Students, Ministerial Circular n. 2796 of 27<sup>th</sup> October 1994.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.enic-naric.net>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.Unesco.org/iau/on-linedatabases/index.html>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.Unesco.org/iau/on-linedatabases/list.html>

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.education.nairobi-Unesco.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=762&Itemid=132](http://www.education.nairobi-Unesco.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=762&Itemid=132)

institutions or agencies claiming to be recognized by Unesco has to be looked upon with suspicion. The website reports nine modes of operations adopted by institutions or agencies that claim to be accredited by Unesco, for each one an example is shown:

- a) the degree is being sold with Unesco's logo – for instance at *World Technological University*;
- b) the name of Unesco is quoted within documents that deal with accreditation – for instance, *Al Qasim University*;
- c) the institution claims to be listed in the *Unesco Higher Education Institutions Registry*, a register that does not exist - es. *Kings University*;
- d) the institution refers to the real Unesco listing, presenting it as a proof of its recognition when it is not the case;
- e) in the web address of the institution appears the word 'Unesco', in order to make the link look more official – for instance es. <http://www.uu-edu.com/unesco.htm>;
- f) reference is made to a fake Unesco chair that has awarded the institution with accreditation. - for instance *European University*;
- g) the institution declares to be pursuing the same goals and ideals of Unesco - for instance quoting 'The Educational Creed of Unesco';
- h) dubious professors with dubious titles that somehow connect them to Unesco are mentioned – for instance, *Intercultural Open University*;
- i) the institutions make deliberate and inaccurate claims, emphasising their status of 'paying members' of institutions closely related to Unesco, as a proof of their recognition which is once again not the case – for instance, *West Coast Institute*, *Golden State University* e *Clayton University*.

Unesco has also published a bulletin called 'Bogus Institutions' <sup>9</sup>, with the aim of supporting students which are about to choose a course of studies or a higher education institution. The document encourages them to refer to institutions and programmes recognized by the national authorities: it is made reference to the IAU database, to the United States Council of Higher Education<sup>10</sup> to the list of accredited institutions of United Kingdom published by the British Government<sup>11</sup> and finally to the list of recognized Australian universities.<sup>12</sup>

#### 1.4 The confidential documents of the Council of Europe

In 1986 the Council of Europe published a list of institutions issuing degrees that were not officially recognized in Europe. The document contained about 700 institutions that were not recognized by any national authority, operating in the higher education sector and divided by country.

<b>Countries with the highest number of irregular institutions</b>		
<i>Position</i>	<i>Number of institutions</i>	<i>Country</i>
1	330	United States
2	150	United Kingdom
3	36	Italy
4	30	Switzerland

(source: CoE)

In 1996, the Council of Europe published a further report for internal use, ten years after the first

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.education.nairobi-Unesco.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=1347&Itemid=56](http://www.education.nairobi-Unesco.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1347&Itemid=56)

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.chea.org/search>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/recognisedukdegrees>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.aqf.edu.au/register.htm>

one.<sup>13</sup> The total number of institutions contained in the document was almost double in comparison to the first one: it actually rose from 700 to about 1.300. The countries showing the highest number of bogus institutions remained unchanged: United States with over 400 irregular institutions, the United Kingdom with 195, Italy with 143 and Switzerland with 97.

### 1.5 The Italian Antitrust Authority (*Autorità Garante della Concorrenza e del Mercato*)

Also known as *Antitrust*, the Italian “*Autorità Garante della Concorrenza e del Mercato - AGCM*” is an independent authority created with law n. 287 approved on 10<sup>th</sup> October 1990 (Competition and Fair Trading Act). Among its many areas of activity, this authority is also competent on matters of misleading and comparative advertising - in compliance with art. III par. II of the legislative decree n. 206, of 6<sup>th</sup> September 2005 – as well as, of conflict of interest, as provided by law n. 215 of 20<sup>th</sup> July 2004. The decree allows consumers, competitors, professional associations and public administrations to issue claims and therefore to enjoy the protection that derives from it. The Authority does not take action on its own initiative, it only does after receiving a warning and it implements measures exclusively in relationship to the claims contained in it.

For the present research, it is very interesting to highlight the high quantity of misleading advertising promoting 'non-recognized' higher education institutions which are punished for various reasons. For instance, because they use in their names terms such as *università* (university) or *politecnico* (polytechnic) when they are not either polytechnics or universities; or because they claim to award academic degrees recognized in Italy and, finally, because they employ terms pertaining to the Italian higher education system, such as *Laurea* (Italian bachelor-level degree) or *Laurea Magistrale* (Italian master-level degree) to describe the qualifications they award.

Misleading advertising is defined as a kind of advertising that misleads or could mislead its targeted audience, i.e. physical or juridical people, and that could influence the economical behaviour of these subjects or damage competitors. The AGCM has enforced more than 150 sanctions against institutions operating in the higher education sector, accused of different types of misleading advertising, both through the press and the Internet.<sup>14</sup>

### 1.6 The lists of diploma mills in the USA

In the United States the phenomenon of 'non-recognized' institutions is very widespread in all States and, in many cases, the internal laws seems to be unable to address the rise of this kind of institutions. In some States it is common practice to publish list of the so-called 'diploma mills'.

- The first list was published by the State of Oregon and it is available on the web site of the Office of degree authorization<sup>15</sup>. In 2006, the list mentioned 331 institutions, providing detailed information concerning their headquarters, the sanctions that they have eventually undergone and possible connections with other irregular institutions. Furthermore, this State provides also an extensive description of the phenomenon of diploma mills, including information also about databases of other States, where it is actually possible to find information about legislation and policies enforced to safeguard the academic titles throughout the United States.
- The State of Main, in the web site of the *Department of Education*, reports 733 irregular

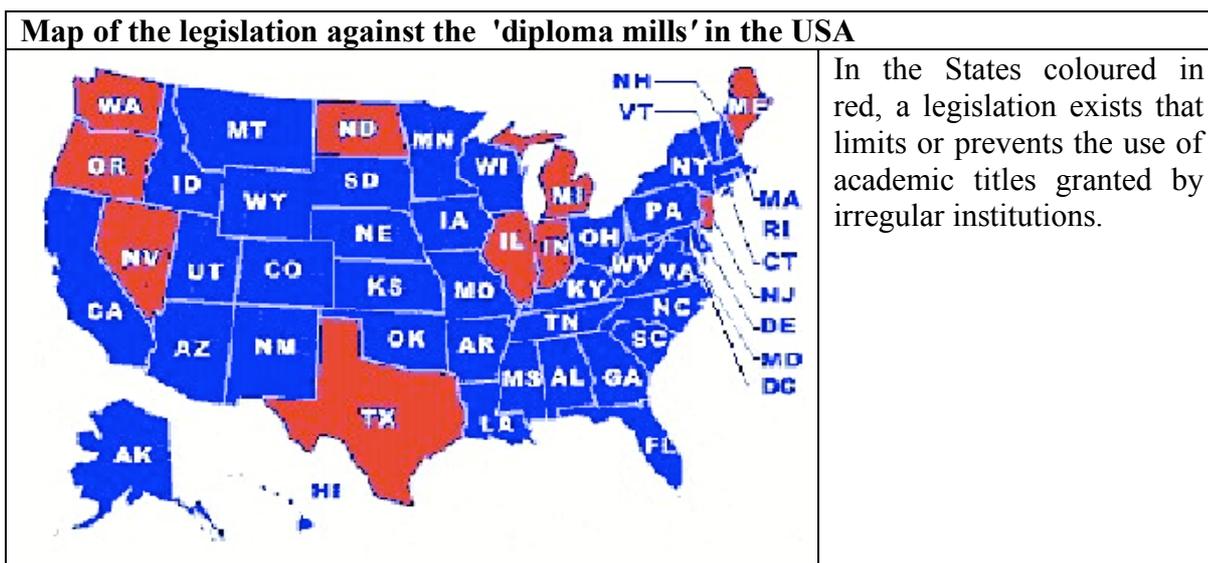
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<sup>13</sup> The following list was published on 20<sup>th</sup> March 1996 and it was entitled “List of institutions of higher education the diplomas and degrees of which are not in general officially recognised in Europe”. The document had been edited by national experts that made their corrections to the previous edition published in 1986.

<sup>14</sup> It is possible to see the measures taken by the Italian Competition Authority on the website <http://www.agcm.it>. A searching engine is also available on the website to support the user in the search of topics of interest.

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.osac.state.or.us/oda/unaccredited.html>

- institutions, divided in alphabetical order, to facilitate the search<sup>16</sup>.
- On the web site of the *Higher Education Coordinating Board*<sup>17</sup>, the State of Texas presents a shorter but still useful list in order to find the institutions that haven't got any kind of recognition.
  - The State of Michigan has published a list<sup>18</sup> drafted by the *Department of Civil Service*, where more than 600 institutions appear, which are not officially recognized by the *Council on Higher Education Accreditation*, along with list of 33 'accreditation mills' which are not recognized by the *US Department of Education*.
  - In Mississippi, thanks to the cooperation with the *Commission on College Accreditation*, a document about the 'non-recognized' institutions has been published<sup>19</sup>: it encompasses nine institutions and it is made clear that, as provided by the current legislation, being registered at the *Secretary of State* is not a proof of approval, accreditation or authorization to grant valid academic degrees.
  - In the State of Hawaii, it is possible to find information concerning irregular institutions, browsing though the pronouncements of the *Department of Commerce & Consumer Affairs*<sup>20</sup>, which has heavily sanctioned all the irregular institutions which used to work or are still working in the territory of the State.



(source: *Office of degree authorization - Oregon*)

### 1.7 The phenomenon of 'diploma mills' in other countries

A recent survey has registered the presence of numerous irregular institutions in many countries worldwide. In this section, an overview will be presented:

- India: a list containing 21 'non-recognized' institutions can be accessed online, though the

16 <http://www.maine.gov/education/highered/Non-Accredited/alphalist.htm>  
 17 <http://www.thecb.state.tx.us/AAR/PrivateInstitutions/fraudnotx.cfm>  
 18 [http://www.michigan.gov/documents/Non-accreditedSchools\\_78090\\_7.pdf](http://www.michigan.gov/documents/Non-accreditedSchools_78090_7.pdf)  
 19 [http://www.ihl.state.ms.us/Academic\\_Affairs1/MCCANonApprovedEntitiesList2005.pdf](http://www.ihl.state.ms.us/Academic_Affairs1/MCCANonApprovedEntitiesList2005.pdf)  
 20 <http://www.hawaii.gov/dcca/areas/ocp/udgi/lawsuits>

website of the *Department of Education*<sup>21</sup> and of the *University Grants Commission*<sup>22</sup>.

- Pakistan: the *Higher Education Commission*<sup>23</sup> has unveiled 22 institutions with 158 different campuses all connected to one main institution..
- Australia: the *Department of Education* in the State of New South Wales<sup>24</sup> has published a list of 'non-recognized' institutions, including among others, Chancery International University, CNBC University, eBay University, the University of Action Learning and Warnborough University. The *Department* has also published extensive information material about genuine academic titles. The purpose of this documents is to provide reliable information about recognized institutions and about the procedures that they have to follow in order to award regular degrees. The targeted audience are the final users of higher education services, such as students, professors and employers.<sup>25</sup>
- The Netherlands: in July 2005 the *Dutch Ministry of Education* announced the creation of a new web site about 'diploma mills': the Centre for information on diploma mills (CIDM)<sup>26</sup>. It is an organization founded thanks to the cooperation of the *Dutch Ministry of Education*, the *Netherlands Organization for International Cooperation in Higher Education*, (Nuffic)<sup>27</sup> - which is also the Enic-Naric centre for the Netherlands – and the *Informatie Beheer Groep* (IB-Groep)<sup>28</sup>, a governmental organization responsible for the execution of several acts concerning the higher education sector. The website, that was originally in Dutch, has been translated into English and provides also general information about irregular degrees, diplomas and institutions. On the website, there is also the option to ask to the experts about the status of specific higher education institutions and of the qualifications they grant.
- Sweden: the *Swedish National Agency for Higher Education*, the *Högskoleverket*<sup>29</sup>, has published a 48 pages report with the title “Fake universities and bogus degrees - Sweden and the world”. The is published in Swedish but a summary is also available in English. It examines 17 cases of institutions that will never receive recognition in Sweden, each one introduced by a brief description of their modus operandi: the University of Northwest, Lexington University, Almeda University, Hamilton University, the University of Asia, the American World University, Barrington University, the Trinity College & University, Washington International University, Pacific Western University, Frederick Taylor University, Adam Smith University, the University of Dorchester, the University of Dunham, Shaftesbury University, Knightsbridge University and Nobel University.
- United Kingdom: the *Department for Education and Skills*<sup>30</sup> has published a warning against 'fake degrees' on their website. The current UK accreditation system is described in detail, while the FAQ section focuses on the phenomenon 'bogus degrees'.

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21 <http://www.education.nic.in/htmlweb/mal.htm>

22 <http://www.ugc.ac.in/inside/fakealerts.html>

23 [http://www.hec.gov.pk/htmls/hei/public\\_alert1.htm](http://www.hec.gov.pk/htmls/hei/public_alert1.htm)

24 <http://www.highered.nsw.gov.au/reports/notapproved.htm>

25 *Is that degree genuine?* (<https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/aboutus/higheredu/fakedegrees.htm>)

26 <http://www.diplomamills.nl>

27 Afdeling Diplomawaardering & Certificering - Den Haag, Olanda (<http://www.nuffic.nl>)

28 <http://www.ib-groep.nl/particulier/index.asp>

29 <http://hsv.se>

30 <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/recognisedukdegrees/index.cfm?fuseaction=content.view&ContentID=2>

### 3. How to spot 'Bogus Institutions'

The easiest way to obtain reliable information about the status of a higher education institution is to directly ask the Naric or Enic centre of the country of interest.<sup>31</sup>

Another method could be to look out for the typical characteristics that mark out an institution that could be a borderline case.

For instance, in the United States, the *Council for Higher Education Accreditation* (CHEA)<sup>32</sup>, has published a checklist of risk indicators. For the purposes of the present study, that list has been expanded and integrated in order to include all exhaustive criteria to spot 'non-recognized' institutions.

In the table below, there is a list of 20 questions which are aimed at understanding the actual accreditation or recognition status of an institution. If the answer to one or more of the questions below is 'yes', there is a strong possibility that the institution is irregular. Nonetheless, it is necessary to bear in mind, that not all 'non-recognized' institutions pursue unlawful goals and not all of them can be defined 'diploma mills'.

<b>20 questions to spot diploma mills</b>	
1	Can degrees be purchased or ordered?
2	Is there a claim of accreditation when there is no evidence of this status?
3	Is there a claim of accreditation from a questionable accrediting organization?
4	Is little if any attendance required? Are exams not encompassed in the academic curriculum?
5	Do the academic titles granted by the institution refer to more than one national higher education system at a time?
6	Are only 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, a much shorter period than the usual duration of academic curricula?
8	Does the institution claim to be recognized worldwide?
9	Does the institution claim to be global, worldwide known and international?
10	Are degrees available based solely on experience or resume review?
11	Does the institution award <i>honoris causa</i> degrees or other kinds of honorary degrees?
12	Are the requirements to obtain a degree too simple?
13	Do fees seem too low or too high in comparison to current standards?
14	Are the headquarters of the institutions identified only through a telephone number, an e-mail or a mail box address?
15	Does the institution fail to provide a list of its faculty members, of its professors and their qualifications?
16	Does the institution have a name similar to other well-known colleges and universities?
17	Does the institution use a label in its name which recall those of another country, despite the fact it does not belong to that country?
18	Does the institution claim to grant degrees that come from foreign recognized universities?
19	Is the Apostille mentioned as a proof of accreditation or recognition of the granted degree?
20	Does the institution highlight that the accreditation is not needed?

(source: CHEA)

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.enic-naric.net>

<sup>32</sup> <http://www.chea.org>

Further alarm bells that could signal the presence of an irregular institution are:

- accreditation agencies mentioned do not have accreditation themselves;
- the main requirement to obtain an academic degree seems to be a valid credit card;
- the institution does not require any previous qualification nor minimum marks for admission;
- the institution only requires a CV or asks the candidate to fill in a questionnaire with information that is not going to be checked;
- the degree is issued in very short time;
- all administrative operations are carried out online.

It is in the interest of the irregular institution to keep its client satisfied and to 'issue' a degree in the shortest possible time, with no need to check the client's data. Such institutions also claim to grant degrees, if there is evidence of a longstanding professional experience: as a matter of fact, professional experience does not count in any country as the sole requirement to award a diploma or a degree.

Furthermore, another clear alarm signal that institutions could not be recognized or accredited is dealing with all administrative duties online, including the delivery of degrees.

Finally, institutions claiming to be recognized or accredited by international institutions must surely be looked upon with suspicion.

Nonetheless, the recognition of the degree must not be confused with the problem of fake institutions. In other words, in some cases, it is not enough to assess if the institutions is recognized or not in order to understand if the awarded degree is genuine and can be recognized.

As a matter of fact, it is necessary to check if a specific course, the type it belongs to and the degree it grants are recognized within the higher education system they belong to.

A very good example of this dynamic is France: here many *écoles supérieures* award both nationally recognized degrees (*diplôme visé*) and qualifications that are recognized by the institution only. This does not mean that they are fake or irregular, it only means that they are not considered official within the French higher education system.

In addition to the checklist to spot 'diploma mills', the US *Council for Higher Education Accreditation* (CHEA) has also published 10 questions to spot 'non-recognized' accrediting agencies, the so-called 'accreditation mills'

<b><i>10 questions to spot accreditation mills</i></b>	
1	Does the agency allow accredited status to be purchased?
2	Does the operation publish lists of accredited institutions without specifying the courses they offer?
3	Are the fees required different from the current ones?
4	Does the operation claim that it is recognized (by, e.g., USDE <sup>33</sup> or CHEA) when it is not?
5	Are the requirements for accreditation very few or non-existent?
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 organization?
8	Is 'permanent' accreditation granted without any requirement for subsequent periodic review?
9	Does the agency use organizational names similar to recognized accrediting organizations?
10	Are 'special offers' and 'sales' advertised to receive accreditation at lower prices?

(source: CHEA)

<sup>33</sup>

US Department of Education: <http://www.ed.gov>

#### 4. Fake degrees

The latest computer technologies and cutting-edge printing techniques have boosted the full or partial counterfeit of qualifications, that can be reproduced in copies identical to the originals.

This phenomenon is mostly widespread in countries where previously 'recognized' institutions have ceased their activity or have changed their name, or where the archives of graduate students or of issued degrees are not accessible because they have been lost, modified or destroyed.

It is the case of some countries belonging to the ex Soviet Union, where the recent political developments have affected both the higher education system and the status of many higher education institutions which has necessarily changed, and makes it difficult to track back the actual award of degrees in the past.

Another example of this procedure is the alteration or change of degrees: In this case regular diplomas issued by a recognized institution are altered by modifying some elements contained in it (student's name, issue date, mark). Also transcripts can be altered, i.e. all certificates, such as the plan of studies, marks, ECTS credits and the letters written by the institution to confirm that the degree has actually been awarded.

In this case too, it is possible to use some tricks in order to spot fake degrees:

- it is advisable to always request original language documents along with their translation. It is not recommended to rely on translations only, even if they seems to be issued by a trustworthy authority;
- it is always advisable to request original documents and never accept only copies of the originals, since they can be more easily counterfeited;
- carefully check for typos, print and grammar mistakes, as well as unusual expressions;
- check the official institution's letter headed paper and the signature of the competent officer;
- if possible, compare the documents that are to be evaluated with other ones issued by the same institution or that come from the same country;
- get in contact with the institution that issued the title in order to double-check the correspondence of name of the student that was awarded with the degree.