



## ENSURING THE INTEGRITY OF HIGHER EDUCATION THROUGH ACCREDITATION

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The global demand for education has significantly boosted the economic attractiveness of getting into the higher education business. Many new providers in all shapes and sizes have sprung up in recent years, creating quality control challenges regarding their operations. External evaluations and independent assessments offer students and society one of the most effective ways to size up these newly established institutions and to combat any corrupt practices that they may employ in their operations.

Higher education systems in both developed and developing countries are experiencing a period of great change – but one that threatens their integrity and the quality of learning.<sup>1</sup>

The increased globalisation of careers and the rising number of international students that are training to enter them means that higher education institutions are no longer brick and mortar or confined to one country. More and more people are going abroad to study, enrolling in foreign programmes based in their own country or using the internet to study courses run from abroad. To meet this demand, there has been an explosion in the number of private higher education providers, particularly in developing countries. Yet how these institutions are being run and delivering on results varies widely.

External quality assurance can help to level the playing field, in particular for students with limited experience or exposure to higher education who are trying to pick a programme. Quality assurance can prevent corruption by ensuring standards and requirements are upheld by all schools and assessing the actual delivery of educational services based on international comparisons. They can also create important accountability channels for providing information about institutions to prospective students and employers, including the quality of their teaching, facilities and curriculum.

Among the different mechanisms for quality assurance, accreditation is among the most vulnerable to corruption. It defines and upholds certain minimum standards and shows that a threshold of quality in education has been met. However, accreditation also brings its own risks of corruption given the power of accreditation bodies in granting legitimacy to higher education providers. Accreditation bodies must therefore be transparent, rigorous and impartial in their accreditation process.

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## THE ISSUE

The importance of accreditation explains why it is also prone to corruption. Accreditation confers status, legitimacy and appropriateness. Part of this legitimacy comes from the process through which a recognised body assesses an institution according to predetermined standards. Global bodies have also recognised the critical role of accreditation and have established international protocols such as *The Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-Border Higher Education*, jointly produced by UNESCO and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (see side bar, page 3).

At its most extreme, the accreditation processes can be entirely bogus. The existence of dubious or fake educational providers on the internet has contributed to so-called 'degree mills' – a lucrative 'industry' in which educational qualifications can be bought. Along with degree mills have come 'accreditation mills', which provide false legitimacy. Degree mills and accreditation mills take advantage of the growing demand for higher education and the wide international disparity in degree and accreditation processes. They promise credentials in a short period of time, at a low cost and to any applicant (see side bar). Although such operations are difficult to trace, recent estimates suggest that more than 2,500 degree and accreditation mills operate globally.<sup>2</sup>

Another form of corruption in quality assurance takes place within legitimate accreditation bodies. Higher education officials may bribe those performing the accreditation. In these instances, trust is violated both for students unknowingly attending such institutions as well as broader society, which relies on its schools to produce well-trained graduates. As argued by an Indian judge in one related case, 'the community at large' as well as 'the standards of "judicial systems" of the country' had been hurt by three lawyers, two of whom were national bar members, who allegedly took bribes to accredit an Indian law school.<sup>3</sup>

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### TO NATIONAL GOVERNMENTS:

#### *Implement existing higher education guidelines<sup>4</sup>*

- Take part in international recognition agreements and make accreditation and quality assurance practices transparent and internationally accessible.
- Set up an authorisation or licensing system for accreditation bodies.
- Involve stakeholders (including students and civil society) in monitoring them to ensure that the guidelines are being met.

#### *Curtail degree mills and accreditation mills*

- Allocate increased and sufficient resources to investigate and discredit degree and accreditation mills operating in their countries.

#### *Improve the accessibility and availability of information to stakeholders*

- Ensure that there is transparency in procedures of assessment, registration and licensing for providers, and information is easily accessible to the public.

### TO ACCREDITATION BODIES:

#### *Demonstrate impartiality and integrity*

- Provide evidence of independence and freedom from third-party influence.
- Ensure public disclosure of operations and evaluations, and establish clear, publicly accessible and impartial regulations for expert assessors.
- Adopt and implement a code of conduct and conflict of interest policy.
- Conduct regular independent internal reviews.

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## DEGREE MILLS AND ACCREDITATION MILLS

A telling characteristic of a degree mill is that customers can simply purchase their qualification, doing little or no work to earn it. Accreditation mills also have revealing signs. Accrediting bodies that offer 'permanent' accreditation for institutions, a quick assessment or fail to indicate clearly the criteria on which they base their assessments, are fraudulent.

The consequences of degree mills can take on a very real form when fake diplomas are used to gain employment that requires in-depth knowledge and skills. Saint Regis University, a fake university in Washington state, was reported to have sold over 9,000 fake credentials to individuals, who took jobs in sensitive positions: one became a worker at a nuclear power plant, another an expert at the US Department of Health oncology department, and a third an employee of the CIA.

For individuals with limited prior experience or exposure to higher education, it may be unclear that the institution is in fact a degree mill and that the coursework required is inappropriately low for obtaining a qualification. For these individuals, degree mills signify financial loss and a missed opportunity for gaining actual skills through a legitimate higher education programme.

### Ensure that the accreditation process is clear, defined, and made public

- Establish an accreditation process that is transparent, with justification of assessments from the accreditors. Unclear and guarded standards and assessments can open the door to corruption.

### Increase the number of accreditors and/or decision-makers responsible

- Guarantee experts with different interests and roles are represented in the process to make it more difficult to take decisions based on flimsy evidence.

## TO HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS:

### Require similar accreditation standards in campuses abroad

- Demand that similar procedures, standards and criteria are used irrespective of location of the campus and the accreditation provider.
- Ensure information provided by school agents to prospective students is 'accurate and reliable' as outlined by the UNESCO/OECD guidelines.

## TO STUDENTS AND CIVIL SOCIETY:

### Monitor the implementation of existing guidelines

- Take an active role in local monitoring and petition governments when misconduct is detected.

### Help detect degree mills and accreditation mills

- Call on student bodies to raise awareness among students about the risks of degree mills and where to report problems (i.e. [www.accredibase.com](http://www.accredibase.com)).
- Use the quick test developed by the US Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), which can be easily used for any accreditation body.<sup>5</sup>

## ABOUT THE SERIES

This policy brief is one of five that has been produced using information presented in Transparency International's *Global Corruption Report: Education*. The report presents more than 70 articles written by experts in the fields of corruption and education, from universities, think tanks, business, civil society and international organisations. The report presents both qualitative and quantitative research to advance our understanding of the dynamics of corruption in the sector and focuses on providing examples of practical solutions. The report is published by Earthscan from Routledge. For more information, see:

[www.transparency.org/research/gcr](http://www.transparency.org/research/gcr)

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all content, facts and figures are drawn from: Transparency International, *Global Corruption Report: Education* (Oxon: Earthscan from Routledge, 2013); Bjørn Stensaker, 'Ensuring quality in quality assurance'; and Stéphan Vincent-Lancrin, 'Cross-border higher education: addressing corruption, ensuring opportunity'.

<sup>2</sup> Eyal Ben Cohen and Rachel Winch, *Diploma and Accreditation Mills: New Trends in Credential Abuse* (Bedford: Verifile and Accredibase, 2011), pp. 23–24.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Legally India, 'Ranagate Exclusive Details: Rana Too Influential, Bail Refused; BC Members are "Public Servants"', 4 January 2011.

<sup>4</sup> This refers to *The Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-Border Higher Education* (UNESCO and OECD).

<sup>5</sup> For more on the CHEA tests, see [www.inqaahe.org/main/accreditation-mills-216/valid-versus-bogus-agencies](http://www.inqaahe.org/main/accreditation-mills-216/valid-versus-bogus-agencies).

<sup>6</sup> For more information, see: <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/education/themes/strengthening-education-systems/higher-education/quality-assurance/giqac/>

<sup>7</sup> See [http://ec.europa.eu/education/higher-education/bologna\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/education/higher-education/bologna_en.htm).

## GLOBAL QUALITY ASSURANCE: A STANDARD FOR ALL?<sup>6</sup>

In 2007, the World Bank and UNESCO launched the Global Initiative for Quality Assurance Capacity (GIQAC). The move was aimed at supporting the rise of quality assurance for higher education in developing countries through capacity building at the regional and national level. It assists emerging and existing quality assurance systems by facilitating the sharing of good practices and producing guidelines, including the UNESCO/OECD Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-border Higher Education.

These guidelines provide recommendations for six major higher education stakeholders: governments; higher education institutions and academic staff; student bodies; quality assurance and accreditation bodies; academic recognition bodies; and professional bodies. Each is asked to commit themselves to quality, transparency and international collaboration. Overall, the guidelines provide a framework for limiting corruption and professional misconduct.

## SETTING THE EU BAR: THE BOLOGNA PROCESS<sup>7</sup>

External quality assurance and accreditation procedures in Europe are usually organised at the national level and vary greatly according to each education system.

In an attempt to set a common European standard, the Bologna Declaration of June 1999 put in motion a series of reforms needed to make European higher education more compatible and comparable for Europeans and for students from other countries. With the Bologna Declaration there is now a general trend to stimulate the establishment of quality assurance agencies in all European countries and to develop closer collaboration in terms of procedures and criteria.

Indeed, if higher educational programmes are to become more comparable at the European level as well as gain recognition globally, the mechanisms for quality assurance should be similar and compatible in their rigour, transparency and clarity.

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