

Degree mills and fake qualifications: Don't get caught

There has recently been much interest generated around fake qualifications in the media. The *Mail & Guardian* (November 25 to December 1 2011, p.22) notes that, "In South Africa up to 15% of formal qualifications submitted for verification are bogus" – the product mainly of what are called diploma/degree mills (fake institutions) mostly based in the United States and the United Kingdom.

The phenomenon of diploma/degree mills is, however, apparently a lot more widespread than the article suggests, and is on a global scale (see also Eyal ben Cohen and Rachel Winch at: <http://www.icde.org/filestore/Resources/Reports/NewTrendsInCredentialAbuse.pdf>, pp. 23-27).

In the South African context, in addition to a high unemployment rate, hundreds of thousands of students who complete their high school education each year find that they are unable to continue with their education due to the failure of our higher education institutions to absorb them into their systems because of space constraints and other infrastructural challenges. Many of these students may fall prey to bogus (or "fly by night") institutions offering illegal qualifications. For some of these students diploma/degree mills become the answer to get a quick "degree"...until, after spending much time, energy and thousands of rands, they discover that the 'qualification' is a fake.

While there are various reasons for people reverting to bogus qualifications (e.g. failure by universities to absorb those who qualify due to shortage of space, or the need to get a qualification in the cheapest and quickest way in order to get a job), sometimes people find it difficult to know which institutions offer genuine and internationally recognised qualifications and which do not. As a general rule, if you can pay for a qualification without doing any serious study or fulfilling additional academic requirements, or if the degree claims to be based on your life experience, then you can be pretty sure that it is fake.

The Council on Higher Education (CHE) seeks to protect the South African public and students by quality assuring and accrediting the higher education programmes offered by all registered higher education institutions in South Africa.

In case of doubt regarding any institution's status, all those who wish to study in a higher education institution in South Africa should always first check that the institution is genuine.

To see the list of public universities or FET Colleges:

<http://www.dhet.gov.za/EducationInstitutions/Universities/tabid/172/Default.aspx>.

<http://www.dhet.gov.za/EducationInstitutions/FETColleges/tabid/174/Default.aspx>.

To verify whether a private provider of higher education is registered and accredited consult the *Register of Private Higher Education Institutions* at:

<http://www.dhet.gov.za/>

To verify whether a private FET college is registered and accredited consult the *List of Registered Private FET Colleges* at:

<http://www.dhet.gov.za/Structure/VCET/PrivateFETColleges/tabid/405/Default.aspx>.