

# Recognition and authentication of higher education qualifications in a transnational market: sorting the cyber wheat from the digital chaff

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## Abstract

This paper seeks to address the burgeoning problem of internet-based degree granting institutions/ educational document providers, and the challenges credential evaluators face when assessing paper based documents for admission purposes. The paper begins by reviewing the various models of higher education provision, ranging from the traditional to the non-traditional, virtual degree granting provider. It is argued that the rise of the for-profit, virtual university has been fuelled, in part, by the sociological pressures of ‘credentialism’ and ‘diplomaism’, suggesting that these perhaps are major factors causing degree qualifications to be seen as currency in both the labour market and higher education sectors. The value placed upon these credentials leads individuals to seek qualifications from a myriad of sources ranging from traditional to illegal. In order to explain these phenomena, two continuums are presented, designed to provide interpretations as to the verification of the legitimacy and acceptability of degree qualifications. Current resources used to provide solutions to the problem of degree acceptance and authentication are presented, and are critiqued in light of future developments surrounding the Bologna Declaration and review of the Hague Apostille Convention. The paper is concluded with a review of current global approaches, either being used or under development, in order to address the issue of qualification verification. The review is used to develop a best practice model for authenticating and recognising degree qualifications presented to both employers and higher education providers in Australia and New Zealand, in an effort to minimise credential fraud and facilitate moves towards a global qualification recognition system.

## Key Words

Degree/ diploma mills, qualification authentication, qualification recognition.

## Introduction

*“The academic community itself must understand that without integrity and meritocracy there can be no true university”* (Altbach 2004)

Higher education, and the institutions established to provide its associated teaching, research and credentialing functions, are established primarily as vehicles for the pursuit of truth. Therefore, it is disheartening and, indeed, concerning that fraud within, and perpetrated against, higher education needs to be addressed. Unfortunately, there is a paucity of academic research in the area, an almost purposeful ignorance and/or avoidance of the problem, suggesting that the issues will magically disappear and be resolved through time. Unfortunately, this is not the case and, as Altbach (2004) so rightly asserts, fraud continues to be perpetrated against and within academia; but is not frequently discussed within academic circles. He argues that higher education institutions believe that they are above such ‘lower instincts’ deemed to be prevalent within other industries. Furthermore, he believes that the public perceives higher education institutions as ‘special’, imbued with virtues of integrity and trust, which are valued and expected to be upheld by the higher education sector. Evidence suggests that these values are clearly under attack. Similar to any other industry where an item of value is produced, there is fraud, and higher education is not immune to this quandary. The recent revelations surrounding the University of Newcastle and the outcome of its plagiarism case (ICAC 2005), Glen Oakley and his string of fabricated qualifications (ICAC 2003) and allegations of overseas students graduating without completing requisite courses (Fullerton 2005) all add recent and relevant fuel to the fraud debate. Notwithstanding this, the current paper is not used to dramatise, sensationalise, nor leverage off these problems; the intent is to provide solutions, to broaden debate and encourage discourse on seeking mutually beneficial outcomes for both the higher education and employment industries in relation to qualification fraud. In seeking to profile the problem at hand, the paper commences

by briefly critiquing a range of higher education provision, specifically highlighting organisations which provide challenges to the recognition of higher education qualifications; these are addressed in the opening section.

### **Models of transnational higher education provision: new approaches, new challenges, new problems**

Whilst the advent of the internet has spawned an array of online ventures in higher education, little has changed in relation to business models and modes of delivery since the mid- to late-nineties. For the purposes of this paper, it is important to delineate between the various types of provider models; a typology of four main models is proposed (Brown 2001, p.49; Middlehurst 2003, p.12) to provide an overview of current provision.

- **Virtual front ends** - these are defined as traditional ‘brick and mortar’ universities creating a web presence for the purposes of providing courses and information to staff and students. The majority of traditional universities have embraced web based technologies to provide flexible delivery of programs, through to online enrolment procedures and information sharing.
- **Collaborative ventures** – Under this model, groups of traditional universities seek to achieve economies of scale by working together to provide the online delivery of programs, generally through one main web portal. Ventures within this model include Universitas 21 (<http://www.universitas21.com>) classed as one of the more successful collaborative ventures, along with the Global University Alliance (<http://www.gua.com>) and the Global Virtual University (<http://www.gvu.unu.edu>). Other success stories have, however, been mixed, with the notable Clyde Virtual University (<http://cvu.strath.ac.uk>) established in 1995 now no longer enjoying government funding. A similar fate was recently dealt to UKeU (<http://www.UKeU.com> – URL broken), with an UK Education and Skills Committee inquiry finding gross mismanagement and excessive salaries contributing to its failure (Samuels 2005). The University of Highlands and Islands (<http://www.uhi.ac.uk>) has been a far more successful venture however, consisting of twelve academic institutions providing distance learning programs to remote Scottish islands (Hills and Lingard 2003).
- **Corporate, non-award** – A significant amount of research has been conducted into this model, assessing the challenges it posed to both regulation and competition in the virtual market place (Cunningham, Tapsall, Ryan, Stedman, Bagdon and Flew 1997; Cunningham, Ryan, Stedman, Tapsall, Bagdon, Flew and Coaldrake 2000). These organisations are primarily research and human resource development arms of corporations which do not purport to issue recognised academic degrees. Examples include Hamburger University (McDonalds fast food chain) ([http://www.mcdonalds.com/corp/career/hamburger\\_university.html](http://www.mcdonalds.com/corp/career/hamburger_university.html)) and Ebay University (<http://pages.ebay.com/university>). The studies surmised that the model did not pose any immediate threat to traditional accreditation approaches; however the use of the word ‘university’ was seen as a concern.
- **New institutions** - These organisations are universities created for the sole purpose of developing their own courses and delivering them totally by online, distance delivery. Typically these entities do not possess a campus and only have a small core faculty. An established example of this model is Jones International University (<http://www.jonesinternational.edu>), a Regionally Accredited institution in the United States which recently celebrated a complete online graduation, viewable at <http://graduation.jonesinternational.edu/2005graduation/ceremony.html>. Within Australia and New Zealand, there have been few examples of fully internet based higher education providers, except for Greenwich University (<http://www.greenwich.edu> – URL broken), Norfolk Island and the Global Virtual University ([www.gvu.ac.nz](http://www.gvu.ac.nz) – URL broken) of New Zealand, which sought to obtain approval as a higher education provider in the Australian State of Queensland in the late 1990s. Both ventures did not move ahead, with Greenwich being the most controversial. Whilst obtaining an Act of Parliament in 1998 and claiming to be Australia’s third private university, Greenwich drew the ire of higher education circles, questioning the processes of establishing the university. This ultimately led to the Act being overridden and the university forced to move firstly to California, and then back to Hawaii where it finally closed.

The above mentioned models have provided a simple typology of the range of transnational higher education offered. Traditional universities have sought to enter the online environment with mixed success. Perhaps the most successful, in terms of number and size, has been the creation of the for-profit 'new institution' model, but not necessarily in its traditionally accredited format. These new institutions range in various forms of legitimacy and acceptability, and will be discussed further in the paper. Before these areas are discussed, the demand side to qualifications is profiled, seeking to address an often understated phenomenon in higher education demand, that of credentialism.

### **Human capital building or shallow 'diplomaism': the value of higher education credentials**

With higher education being a valuable export industry for Australia and New Zealand, much of its activity has come under recent scrutiny regarding quality and reliance on funding from overseas students. This increase, according to Ashenden (1992, p.247), has been fuelled primarily by the escalating competition for credentials. Degree qualifications, just like birth certificates, passports and social security cards, can be seen as valuable items of personal property (Noah and Eckstein 2001), and are used as important signifiers of an individual's bona fides and potential competence in an employment situation. Marginson (2004, p.7) concurs, suggesting higher education qualifications are valued as a positional good which confer advantages on some individuals, but denies those advantages to others. As such, qualifications serve as status goods, priced according to their power and position with their possessors viewed as holding certain levels of status or competence, a documented expression of who or what they are (Noah and Eckstein 2001, p.61). It is the value of the parchment, attesting to a claimed qualification which the author argues has led to fraud occurring in this area, and has become of a major concern to regulatory bodies and admission authorities. Statistics within Australia demonstrate that many individuals resort to desperation and feign legitimacy by holding out to possess qualifications they did not earn. Elizabeth Jones, CEO of the Queensland Tertiary Admissions Centre (QTAC) suggests twenty five to thirty percent of applicants exaggerate or falsify their qualifications in a prospective employment situation within Australia (Healy 2005), whilst for just one employer, KPMG found twenty six cases of falsified qualifications presented by prospective employees (Lucas 2004). Arguably, these figures are fuelled by the rise in credentialism and the yearning for qualifications, with desperate individuals seeking to obtain these via a range of means. Dr Hu Dayuan, Dean of the Beijing International MBA program at Peking University suggests a 'me-too' mentality is prevalent among young aspiring degree hopefuls. He found that most of the students he encounters are purely seeking the qualification, perceiving the test itself as being the most important aspect of the process, not the inherent education that underpins the process. 'If I'd offered them the diploma in trade for the tuition today, they'd have said 'Deal!'' (Kuo 2005).

### **The new institution model: new challenges for recognition and regulation**

The previously cited Greenwich University saga described under the new institutions model brought to the fore issues of new private providers and challenges to accreditation criteria in Australia (Brown 2001; McBurnie and Ziguras 2001; Brown 2002; 2004). Unfortunately, the Greenwich case sullied the work of many sincere, non-traditional universities, with sceptics of these ventures labelling them as 'diploma mills' or 'degree mills'. The past Vice Chancellor of Greenwich University, Dr Douglas Capogrossi has been one of the most fierce defenders of non-traditional higher education institutions, arguing that existing approaches to accreditation fail to encompass the new institution model (Capogrossi 2002). He has continued to espouse the virtues of non-traditional higher education and is now President of Akamai University (<http://www.akamaiuniversity.us>), a non-traditional university licensed in the State of Hawaii and delivering programs across the Asian region. Sincere and openly forthright in his assertions, Dr Capogrossi (whose PhD comes from Cornell University) vehemently denies that all unaccredited universities are degree mills, and provides a strong case for the encouragement of alternative modes of education. His position was recently strengthened when the unaccredited Kennedy Western University (<http://www.kw.edu>), an entirely virtual institution in the United States, recently challenged legislation in the State of Oregon and had it altered to allow individuals to use unaccredited degrees in that state. So long as individuals divulge the unaccredited status of their degree on business cards and promotional material, these may now be used freely (Sinks 2005).

Unfortunately, although advocates for alternative higher education may be well intentioned, there is a range of credential providers which adds fuel to the 'degree mill' debate, and provides ammunition for those who yearn for a fully regulated market. One such extreme provider is the University Degree Program (UDP)



section builds upon the credentialism debate and profiles the burgeoning industry of higher education credential fraud.

### **Qualification fraud issues in Australia and New Zealand: the far end of the continuum**

The cases of John Davy of Maori TV in New Zealand and Glenn Oakley in Australia brought to the fore the problem of falsified credentials. Whilst Davy purchased his qualification off of the internet, Glenn Oakley falsified all of the parchments for his claimed Bachelor, Master and PhD degrees. Notwithstanding this, it may be argued that both perpetrators performed their roles extremely well, but were advantaged by their falsified credentials. This advantage has been profiled within the media in Australia and New Zealand over recent years. In 2002, New Zealand became alarmed at sites such as <http://www.fakedegrees.com> (still in operation) and offerings provided by UK resident Peter Leon Quinn (aka 'The Magician') were profiled, raising great concern amongst higher education administrators. Professor James McWha (then Chair of the New Zealand Vice Chancellor's Committee and Vice Chancellor of Massey University) asserted that it was virtually impossible to control such activity due to cost and urged employers to be vigilant (Fake degrees a concern 2002; "NZVCC Electronic News Bulletin" 2002; Cohen 2002b; Middleton 2002). In mid June 2004, fifty Massey University parchments were seized, including fake stamps and seals. Media reports suggested 'thousands' were in circulation, used as part of an alleged immigration racket operating at the time (Universities on alert for fake degrees after arrest for fraud 2004; Authorities on alert for fake documents 2004; Document forgery causing concern 2004; Forgery bust doesn't surprise consultants 2004; Police Bust Fake Document Operation 2004). Concerns raised saw Auckland University of Technology issue a press release, urging employers to check with the university if they had any concerns (AUT 2004). The problem occurred again more recently, involving the falsification of Massey University degree parchments. It was found that the parchments were printed in China, discovered by New Zealand Customs during a routine check. Taking only ten days to obtain, for a cost of \$NZ83, this again raised the ire of Massey University, which urged all prospective employers to check with the university for verification (Student helped forge degrees 2005; Student sold fake Massey degree in China 2005; Student forged degree for money 2005; Butler 2005; Dow and Fisher 2005).

Concerns regarding falsification of Australian testamurs were first raised in 1999, when a company called Blacks Professionals based in Queensland claimed to offer perfect replicas of degrees from over eighty three universities worldwide, including all universities in Australia (Bernoth 1999). KPMG and PRM undertook research in 2000, finding up to 25% of executives falsified information in their resumes, including the falsification of qualifications (Robinson 2000; Stockton 2000), asserting that fake university degree sites were partly to blame for the increase in falsified resumes. It was not until 2002, the same time period in New Zealand, when Australia became alarmed at the proliferation of fake degree sites and the availability of replica testamurs from Australian universities. Institutions became concerned when a site offered to sell 'verifiable' degrees from Monash University, University of Queensland, Curtin University of Technology, University of Newcastle and University of Western Sydney (Online buy-a-degree scam targets Asians 2002; Internet scam offers fake degrees from Melbourne universities 2002; Heinrichs 2002; Lawnham 2002c; Maslen 2002; Page 2002). In addition to fake degrees, falsified Microsoft engineer certificates were discovered being offered in Australia, implicating St Regis University, a Dominican (now a closed Liberian based university company) which recently settled a lawsuit with the established Regis University in the United States (Lawnham 2002d; b). At this time, the Australian Vice Chancellors Committee, along with authorities in New Zealand, commenced exploring the creation of an online verification system designed to combat the 'verification' claims and potential threats to universities' graduation databases (Cohen 2002a; Lawnham 2002a), whilst media releases were issued from a range of universities, announcing their systems were secure and could not be breached (University Secure From External Security Breaches 2002; Monash student records systems secure 2002).

In 2003, discussions in South Australia appeared to move towards the use of tamper proof paper for parchments and transcripts (Crouch 2003), however this did not eventuate, including a proposed study by the AVCC which sought to quantify the problem of the fake degree problem (Buckell 2003). Meanwhile the states of New South Wales, Queensland and the Commonwealth launched websites, warning stakeholders of the problems surrounding fraudulent qualifications. ("Phony degrees proliferate down under" 2003; NSW to crack down on fake degrees 2003; Buckell 2003; Mulligan 2003). The following year saw relatively little coverage on fraudulent degree problems, apart from updated alerts on the problem being issued from KPMG

and stories airing on national television (KPMG 2004; Lohse 2004). For 2005, the case of Dr Jayant Patel (aka Dr Death) in Queensland, whilst not directly related to credential fraud, has highlighted the problem of poor background screening and the ability to purchase replica testamurs from the internet (Lawrence 2005), and the announcement of Qualsearch profiled further in this paper (Healy 2005).

### **Existing European methods of recognition: innovative approaches or further confusion?**

In the areas of qualification recognition, there have been some excellent practices emanating from Europe. The Lisbon Convention of 1997 and the subsequent Bologna Declaration in 1999 sought to rationalise recognition processes vis a vis qualifications. Whilst recognition intra-Europe was an important factor, Wende (2000, p.5) argues that competition and the 'threat that is felt from non-traditional and non-European providers of higher education that enter the European market, by means of branch-campuses, virtual universities' called for a re-thinking of regulation. These concerns are not unfounded (as previously discussed), however, aspects of understanding countries qualifications were at the core of these resolutions. With the burgeoning increase in transnational education and increased student mobility, a distinct need was seen for clearer information about tertiary qualifications which are used by individuals to access further education, secure employment and assist in migration processes. As such, the Diploma Supplement was created, defined by the pilot project as a document issued to accompany a testamur that provides the following information:

- a description and explanation of the qualification such as whether the qualification admits the recipient to further study or registration as a professional;
- information about the status of the awarding institution;
- information about the higher education system;
- other relevant information such as a description of any period of study or training undertaken in another institution, company or country; and
- information sources particular to the qualification such as the higher education institution website.

Whilst the Lisbon and Bologna declarations are European initiatives, both the Australian and New Zealand governments saw this as an important step towards recognition processes and became signatories to the *Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education in the European Region* (the Lisbon Convention) on the 19<sup>th</sup> September, 2000 (UNESCO 1997). Under Article IX of the Lisbon Convention, all signatories to the Convention have committed themselves to establishing transparent systems for the complete description of qualifications in higher education and to promoting and use of the 'Diploma Supplement' or another comparable document to improve the international transparency of higher education qualifications. Since December 2002, six Australian institutions (The University of Queensland, Queensland University of Technology, Central Queensland University, Swinburne University of Technology, RMIT University and Canberra Institute of Technology) have been involved in a pilot project funded by the Department of Education, Science and Training. The study has sought to determine the costs and implications for institutions issuing the Diploma Supplement and have also produced sample diploma supplements. This pilot project is to be evaluated in due course (Wu 2004, pers.comm. 12 October); however it is unclear as to how the provision of the diploma supplement will be regulated. Whilst the new supplemental information will be a welcome step for interpretation of qualifications, especially for employers, there already has been one non-traditional institution claiming to offer the diploma supplement as part of its service to students. Athenaeum University International (<http://www.unicollege-edu.net>) is an unaccredited university, incorporated as a charity in Panama and operates a branch campus in the United Kingdom. It is not part of the Panamanian higher education as it has not been evaluated by the Ministry of Education, and operates without supervision in the United Kingdom. It makes the following offerings/claims pertaining to the diploma supplement:

As a fully licensed university with an incorporated active branch in a European Union country, Athenaeum is empowered to issue, in addition to regular degrees, European Union Diploma Supplements to all its graduates. For more information about the value of European Union Diploma Supplements, please visit the European Commission and CHEA websites. (Source: <http://www.unicollege-edu.net/affiliation.html>)

Should institutions such as Athenaeum be permitted to use the Diploma supplement as part of its marketing approach in the future? It is yet to be seen how Athenaeum will describe its operations within a particular higher education system, and the status of its degree awarding powers.

The Apostille service is also another form of document authentication which is used by some providers as an additional service for recognition, and has been subject to abuse. Services such as Custom Degrees (<http://www.customdegrees.com>), the National Board Accreditation (<http://www.nationalboardedu.com>) and Chase University (<http://www.bondwebcreations.com/ChaseUniversity/index.html>) are but a few organisations that promote the opportunity for degree recipients to validate and authenticate their qualifications. Under the Apostille service, academic documents are authenticated through a notarization process. Ezell (2005) asserts that degree mills encourage the Apostille for persons using their transcripts and degrees abroad as, '... persons receiving these documents are blinded by the seals, ribbons, and signatures, and spend little time examining the underlying documents'. These concerns have called for a review of the Apostille, with a possible abolition of the notarisation service provided for academic documents (see [http://www.hcch.net/index\\_en.php?act=conventions.publications&dtid=33&cid=41](http://www.hcch.net/index_en.php?act=conventions.publications&dtid=33&cid=41)).

### **Recognition and authentication approaches: towards a comprehensive model for Australia and New Zealand**

From an international recognition level, the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) in its recent publication 'The Guidelines in Quality Provision of Cross-border Higher Education' recommend that student bodies (amongst other stakeholders) should be educated and provided with resources so that informed decisions can be made regarding the offerings now available (OECD 2005). This is an important first step in seeking to provide consumers with a comprehensive and equitable recognition system, another key imperative which is still recommended as being a core aim of global collaborations and research (OECD 2004b). Whilst it still appears to be some time off, a worldwide, concise online database listing all 'accredited' institutions of higher education is clearly an imperative (Farrington 2001, p.84) that has been initiated, albeit on a voluntary basis.

Notwithstanding the above, these approaches do not solve the dilemma of authenticating prospective student's qualifications, a problem which has been/ is being addressed by a variety of jurisdictions. The following are an example of the global approaches to qualification authentication currently being used (Brown 2005; 2006):

- *South Africa* – The first of its kind in the world, South Africa boasts a fully automated, centralised online degree verification system developed by the global background verification company Kroll MIE – <http://www.mie.co.za>. This system links each of the universities and technikons to a centralised database where third party queries may be fielded.
- *India* – Seeking to combat an exponential rise in qualification fraud, some higher education institutions are looking to place microchips within conferred testamurs (Upadhayay 2004), whilst a new innovative software system is seeking to allow verifications to be performed online via a barcode and photo technology (Software to help cos check on fake degrees 2005)
- *China* – China claims to have developed a central verification centre, where one may confirm the legitimacy of qualification – see <http://www.chsi.com.cn>. Unfortunately, messages to this site are returned as undeliverable, and up to five fraudulent verification sites have already been identified (AEI 2004). Notwithstanding this, an Australian organisation, VETASSESS, has obtained an agency agreement to perform verifications (see below)
- *United Kingdom* – Experian (<http://www.experian.com>) a UK based background screening company sought to develop a centralised online verification, similar to the South African model (Sayers 2000). It appears that privacy legislation has prohibited the venture from progressing further than the conceptual stages.
- *United States* – For many years, the higher education institutions have outsourced their qualification verification services to private providers such as Credentials Inc. (<http://www.degreechk.com>) which provides a verification service on behalf of The University of Arizona. For a more centralised approach, the National Student Clearinghouse (<http://www.studentclearinghouse.org>) provides verifications for a wide range of currently enrolled students, and past graduates.
- *Sweden* – Similar to the South African model, Sweden is currently refining an online program entitled LADOK. Students are required to manage a computerised profile for the duration of their

studies, and then provide their identification number to prospective employers who may verify their qualifications through an online web portal - see <http://www.ladok.se>

Whilst global approaches to qualification authentication are slow to take momentum, Australia is moving ahead well in the area. Since the early explorations of a degree verification system undertaken in 2002, the protection of Australian higher education qualifications has finally been realised, with the release of Qualsearch (<http://www.qualsearch.com.au>), an online authentication system designed to assess claims of Australian qualifications conferred by Australian universities (Healy 2005). Borne out of technology pioneered by QTAC, the system draws on an existing platform facilitating third party queries to be performed via an online portal. The pilot study conducted with a select range of Queensland institutions and members of the Recruitment and Consulting Services Association of Australia (RCSA) has been completed and the system is due to be rolled out across Australia later in 2005. In the meantime, other institutions have been making attempts to provide authentication approaches. The University of Melbourne makes its entire graduation lists freely accessible as a searchable database at <https://sis.unimelb.edu.au/cgi-bin/awards.pl>, whilst the University of Wollongong has its graduate lists available at <http://www.uow.edu.au/student/graduation/gradroll.html>, although these are only available from 2001. Other state based initiatives include South Australia and Tasmania which have developed (or are in the process of developing) a Client Qualification Register, designed to hold a central digitised repository of all qualifications conferred from all levels of education (Foreshaw 2005). Presently, it is unclear if this information will be opened up and accessible for third party enquiries to be permitted.

With China being an important and emerging market as a source of student recruitment, concerns have consistently been raised as to the authenticity of claimed qualifications. In a recent development, VETASSES based in Victoria, has recently been appointed the first agent outside of China to authenticate Chinese qualifications. Applications can be lodged online via their site at <http://www.qualverify.com> with charges at about \$60.00 per verification. Whilst this may appear a foolproof solution, claims are already emanating from Shuangfeng, the capital of fake degree production in China, that verifications can be 'guaranteed' for up to ten years, via the use of corrupt employees within the government organisations (Ryan 2005)

In relation to document security, RMIT University in Vietnam is one of the first Australian providers to use polymer banknote technology in order to minimise fraudulent alterations on issued transcripts and testamurs (Overland 2004). Such pioneering moves have stirred interest from South Australian universities, some of which are investigating the options and benefits this technology provides (Cox 2005). In relation to policy initiatives, Macquarie University is perhaps one of the most innovative institutions, having developed a comprehensive policy and procedure addressing the problem of fraudulent qualifications being used for admission to its programs. Whilst in draft form, it is a firm step in the right direction for addressing the problem.

## Conclusion

*"All universities are degree factories. One way or another, they're a degree mill."* Professor Jim Mienczakowski, Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic & Research), Central Queensland University (Fullerton 2005)

A recent news story on Australian ABC Four Corners shook the foundations of Australian international higher education. Raising issues of quality and funding, the above-mentioned quote was perhaps one of the most astonishing revolutionary perceptions of the higher education sector. As demonstrated in this paper, the term 'degree mill' should not, and cannot, be used as a broad brush to categorise institutions of higher learning. Notwithstanding this, the internet superhighway has created something of an online wheat field, where one must be wary. There are prime sources for educational betterment, holding recognised accreditation alleging a guaranteed quality education and recognised qualification. Then there is the chaff, the 'bottom-of-the-barrel' organisations, promising instant qualifications and feigning legitimacy via association with other established providers. The task of separating the wheat from the chaff is a challenging procedure; higher education staff within Australia and New Zealand must be ever vigilant and use the tools outlined in this paper. Building on this research, it is envisaged that a solution to the authentication dilemma will be realised and provide a further level of quality assurance to this important and increasingly expanding industry.

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