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| **Council of Europe Platform on Ethics, Transparency and Integrity in Education (ETINED)** |
| **Symposium** |
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| **Council of Europe** |
| **29-30 November 2018**  |
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***Countering Education Fraud***

**Preparatory note for the Symposium**

**Introduction**

Fraud in education is not a new phenomenon. Historical chronicles testify to the fact that as soon the first universities was born in Europe in the Middle Ages also corruption, “selling” of qualifications, falsification of documents flourished accordingly.

But nowadays this old phenomenon poses new threats: the widespread use of technology offers the possibility to easily forge authentic documents and to create at low if no cost sophisticated fake qualifications that looks almost like the authentic ones. The internationalisation of Higher Education led also to the spreading of Diploma Mills, taking roots especially where there is no the legal value of qualifications, and where the official name of universities and of degrees is not protected by the national law. The emergence of cross-border and transnational education (TNE) had an impact on the 'accreditation' of dubious educational institutions, leading to awarding degrees without quality assurance assessment and without any academic value.

The goal of this preparatory note is to:

* highlight some of the topics that the symposium will deal with;
* raise awareness about different aspects of the phenomenon;
* give food for thought to participants regarding the experiences, the good practices and the challenges that they have in their national systems. Sharing of national and international experiences is an important goal of the symposium.

**Awareness of the phenomenon**

There are different typologies of education fraud: fraudulent final diplomas, transcripts, letter of recommendation, plagiarism, contract cheating, diploma mills/fake institutions, etc.

Dimension of the phenomenon

One challenge in tackling document fraud and fraud in education more in general is the absence of official statistics. If participants have official data are invited to share them.

Diversity of Educational Mills

There are different examples of “Educational Mills”:

* **Diploma Mill**: a private institution, posing as an education institution, which is neither recognised by national competent authorities nor duly accredited, and that awards fraudulent or useless qualifications.
* **Accreditation Mill**: Accreditation mill refers to a non-recognised, usually non-existent accreditation organization that claims to provide accreditation without having any authorisation to do so.
* **Visa Mill**: private institutions that act as colleges and universities in order to circumvent visa laws and for money offer foreign nationals student visas that allow them stay and work in a country.

**Legislation on Education Fraud**

Legislation is a powerful tool to fight the phenomenon. Some examples are:

* **regulation on the use of the terms** (or its equivalent) in official languages and official translation: university, college, school, institute, academy, and penalties for inappropriate legal use of these terms;
* the **protection of academic and professional titles** (or its equivalent) in official languages and official translation (e.g. B.A., M.A., PhD, Doctor, Engineer, etc.);
* **use of credentials from diploma mills illegal** according to national jurisdiction;
* **the protection of consumers by antitrust authorities** in cases of misleading advertising in the education sector.

**Policies and procedures**

Transparent and reliable policies and procedure at national and institutional level are crucial. Some examples are:

* **information provision** and information campaign targeted to students, staff and professionals on the topic of education fraud, also informing applicants about the risks of providing fraudulent information and commit types of education fraud;
* **involvement of relevant stakeholders** (e.g. ENIC-NARIC centres, national competent authorities, antitrust agencies, etc.);
* promoting the adoption of a **Code of Ethics** at institutional/organisational level;
* academic integrity, financial irregularities and education fraud can be part of the assessment criteria in **quality assurance**.

**Action**

Countries could adopt a national action plan and/or push for practices targeted to prevent, monitor and to fight the phenomenon of education fraud. Here some examples:

* **Use of digital data** at national or institutional level for the exchange and verification of credentials (e.g. national online database of qualifications that can be verified, list of institutions that allow verification of their qualifications, etc.).
* **National databases** where it is possible **to verify the authenticity of qualifications** awarded by accredited educational providers in your country (e.g. a national registry where it is possible to verify the authenticity of upper secondary school qualifications).
* **Training** on the topic of education fraud for staff (e.g. how to detect a fraudulent qualification, who contact for advice/information, etc.).
* Promote the use of **IT solution to fight education fraud** (e.g. software to detect contract cheating and plagiarism, e-transcripts, secure pdf and digital signature to exchange academic transcript, QR code to see the transcript and marks of the students, bar code instead of names in taking written exams, specific software for online interviews, etc.)
* Establishing at **international level an** **agreed and common legal framework** useful to prevent, to monitor and to prosecute fraud in education.

**Questions for discussion**

* How would it be possible to reinforce/improve/change the *procedures* and the *legislation* for tackling fraudulent/forged qualifications and Diploma Mills?
* What actions need to be taken at national level, and what should be done at European level?
* What kind of improvement/reinforcement/changes is it possible to adopt?
* To realise this improvement, who should be involved (i.e. decision makers, ministries, international organisations, etc.)?
* How to measure the improvement/changes? What could be the indicators? What is the possible timeframe (short, medium or long term)?
* In your national situation, in which field more precisely would you see the need for an improvement?
* What good practice(s) from your country would you like to share with other participants?