

# Global cooperation needed to tackle 'disease' of fake degrees

New technologies making academic fraud ever more common and sophisticated

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Artificial intelligence has led to a dramatic increase in fake degrees and academic fraud, experts have warned, urging countries to improve global cooperation and adopt new technologies to verify qualifications.

The global “fake degree industry” (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/indias-fake-universities-proliferate-demand-outstrips-supply>) has grown into a US\$22 billion (£16 billion) business as demand for higher education has risen, Unesco chief of section for higher education Noah Sobe told a webinar on 8 July.

“Technology, which can also be our friend, does make it easier, in other instances, to profit from and to propagate illegitimate information and false credentials,” Sobe added.

He pointed to the role of Unesco’s Global Convention on Higher Education in tackling the issue. The convention, which now has more than 40 state parties, encourages governments to adopt measures to eradicate fraudulent higher education qualifications through international cooperation.

Joanne Duklas, executive director of the Groningen Declaration Network, said the scale and complexity of credential fraud had changed dramatically in recent years.



Source: Getty Images/Mikhail Davidovich

“Gone are the days when it’s just from a paper transcript,” she said, pointing to AI-assisted forgery, document fabrication, diploma mills (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/college-staff-directed-students-towards-essay-mills-and-ai>), contract cheating and identity fraud.

Duklas warned that behind every fraudulent credential are real-world consequences for students, universities and employers.

“[Addressing fraud] requires not only technology, but also professional judgment, trained evaluators, clear policies, trusted institutional relationships, robust quality assurance processes, vigilance and awareness,” Duklas said. “No country can solve this independently.”

Andreas Snildal of the Norwegian Directorate for Higher Education and Skills described fraud as a global industry (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/hong-kong-leader-warns-mainland-students-fake-degrees>) that requires coordinated international action.

Norway assesses roughly 20,000 foreign qualifications each year but limited resources make it impossible to verify every credential directly with issuing institutions, he said. Instead, authorities combine legal sanctions with specialist fraud detection teams, document analysis, verification databases and cooperation with overseas partners.

“We have developed a number of practices and measures to prevent and detect fraud,” he said, adding that stronger networks of national information centres would make cross-border verification faster and more reliable.

Technology companies are also adapting to the changing landscape. Simone Ravaioli, a senior director at Instructure, an e-learning provider, said AI had transformed the nature of credential fraud.

“Fifteen years ago, digital was the cure for diploma fraud,” he said. “Today, digital is also the disease and the cure again.”

Although AI is making fake credentials easier to produce, Ravaioli stressed that technologies such as cryptographic verification and digital credentials can also make qualifications more secure. The challenge is ensuring solutions are accessible to institutions at different stages of digital development, he added.

“What the sector needs, and what will help us on the digital credentialing side, is to fight the new threats that come from technology itself,” he said.

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