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Fake Qualifications and the Challenge of regulating Higher Education in Southern Africa

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FAKE QUALIFICATIONS AND THE CHALLENGE OF REGULATING HIGHER EDUCATION IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

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Abstract: This article examines the prevalence and implications of fake qualifications and the need for an effective regulatory regime to contain fake higher education qualifications. Fake qualifications by definition refer to false academic and professional credentials, regardless of the source, which means they may be acquired from illegitimate institutions, superficially legitimate institutions or through illegitimate means from legitimate institutions. The qualifications are in this sense illegitimate both in the manner in which they are obtained and also in terms of what they signify. The research for this article shows that the clandestine nature of the production and issuance and its global reach make it difficult to quantify, but also to control the use of fake qualifications and to manage their impact locally, nationally and globally. Drawing from several cases, it is apparent that the phenomenon of fake qualifications defies the integrity and legitimate expectations from an education system and is a serious challenge to education and ethical standards. It is further argued that given the challenges presented by the proliferation of fake qualifications generally, and in southern Africa in particular, it is imperative for higher education institutions, regulatory bodies, employers and the general public to develop a keen interest in the subject of fake qualifications and to cooperate in order to contain the menace.

Keywords: *qualifications, higher education, southern Africa, globalisation, regulatory*

Introduction

The term higher education embodies all forms of organised learning and training at the tertiary level, including all manner of learning

experiences and qualifications (Assié-Lumumba 2006). Students and therefore graduates are expected to acquire knowledge, skills and competences appropriate for this level of education and training and the ability to contribute effectively to producing knowledge as well as developing critical faculties to a level where they can contribute positively to socio-economic and cultural transformation (Garwe 2015; Nyangau 2014; Thiaw 2007). Writing on the subject of “corrupt schools and colleges” a decade ago, Hallak and Poisson (2007a) noted that the higher education sector the world over faces significant difficulties ranging from financial constraints; weak management; low efficiency; a wastage of resources; the low quality of service delivery; lack of relevance as illustrated by the high unemployment of graduates. Other than the challenges of funding and resourcing higher education requirements, there have been growing concerns surrounding the phenomenon of fake or counterfeit qualifications (Cooley and Cooley 2008; Garwe 2015).

The subject of fake academic and professional qualifications has been around for some time and the globalisation of information has made the phenomenon more pronounced. Globally fake qualifications are associated with diploma mills; understood as institutions that peddle academic and professional qualifications: certificates, diplomas and degrees. To date, the advancement in information and communication technology and the compression of time-space aspects of social interaction associated with globalisation have escalated the phenomenon, partly because of the ease of creating fraudulent institutions on the Internet. It has been suggested that a web designer can create a home page for a fraudulent college or university with effects that approximate the outlook, feel and properties of the home page of a legitimate, well established, respected and high profile higher education and training institution. High resolution printers, scanners and colour photocopiers have become powerful enablers in the production of fake certificates. Apparently, easy access to academic information through web-based catalogues and institutional web pages, which in some cases may include the signatures of institutional officials as well as ready for scanning, copying and reproduction technology have eased the process. The combined effect is that it is difficult and almost impossible to tell the difference between genuine and fake higher education providers and decipher genuine from fake qualifications, to track perpetrators

and control or confine the damaging effects nationally and globally. On the other hand, the accelerated flow of scholars, both academics and students, and the rising cross border provision of education and training have also increased. It has been shown for Africa that the lack of comparable education standards, associated with different colonial education systems (Nyangau 2014), add further difficulties to deciphering legitimate and illegitimate credentials coming from different systems in the job market. Apparently, the phenomenon is a contemporary challenge, which also calls into question the neoliberal promise of self-determination and the individual, social and ethical potentials (Lawn and Prentice 2015). Yet the legitimate expectations of those possessing credentials have not changed even in the midst of concerns about declining higher education standards (Thiaw 2007). Several pertinent questions arise about the quality and standards of education, accessibility, and the integrity of higher education systems. For instance, how falsity in qualifications arises, and how it affects the legitimacy of genuinely acquired qualifications, are important questions of investigation for the higher education community and the emerging higher education regulatory structures in southern Africa. In the final analysis, the phenomenon of fake qualifications is a serious problem, but an obsession with degrees is far much worse as it is a catalyst for the proliferation of fake qualifications.

Theoretical and Methodological Considerations

It is apparent that years of completed education send a social signal to employers, demonstrating that individuals have acquired some skills and knowledge, but educational credentials are more powerful as determinants of occupational success than years of education (Leiper 2003). The phenomenon of fake qualifications implies that the academic and professional qualifications cease to signify what is stated; which is in essence a serious matter of concern about the validity and reliability of such qualifications. Combining various theoretical frameworks, globalisation, informality, credentialism (introduced later) and neoliberalism, this article will examine the dynamics and challenges associated with the phenomenon of fake qualifications.

For globalisation, the critical question is not whether globalisation will continue or intensify, as this is certain, but whether its effects

will ultimately be harmful, through a further widening of the gap between the economic, technological, and educational advanced and less advanced nations (Nyamnjoh 2000). The tendency in higher education institutions has been to reduce globalisation to selling or exporting an institution's educational product instead of looking at what the global economy can do for the institution and for the student. Apparently, attracting international students, research collaborations, contracts, or marketing distance learning to students around the world have contributed to the overall internationalisation of training institutions, yet the contribution to social transformation has been more often a by-product of an entrepreneurial activity than a primary goal. While true for the proliferation of private universities in many African countries, the proliferation of counterfeit and fake qualifications alongside unaccredited institutions is a disturbing facet of the globalisation of higher education. It has been mentioned that the rise of fake qualifications means that some higher education institutions unwittingly partner with degree mills that operate within national borders or abroad (du Plessis et al. 2015). Coincidentally, the prevailing political economy reflects inter-country and regional differentials and unequal capacities to tap from the advantages offered by globalisation or meet the challenges it engenders (Akokpari 2000; Nyamnjoh 2000; Jimu 2016), including challenges to do with the unequal access to education opportunities and widening disparities in access to employment opportunities against rising informality.

Since the late 1980s the informal economy has been associated with activities that have emerged due to the failure of developing countries to formally make the kind of economic progress that may have allowed for, among other benefits, low urban unemployment rates among the youth, reductions in national poverty rates, wages and salaries that keep pace with inflation, the ready availability of basic goods and services, a functioning infrastructure, and an efficient bureaucracy (Jimu 2016) as well as an efficient higher education that responds to the need for inclusive and equitable access, quality and relevance and lifelong learning. The importance of informality is that, as Laguerre put it, it is located just beneath and in the interstices of the formal systems, not in the geographical sense, but rather structurally and hermeneutically (Laguerre 1994). The individuals and groups involved in informal systems are often aware that their actions are unconventional. Even though informality manifests marginality,

as Khalanyane (2012) observed, the ineligible are not a helpless group in the society; instead, they are proactive agents who strive to usurp what is denied them by the eligible. For higher education the implications may include a proliferation of diploma mills which in a way is also a form of usurpation. Khalanyane (2012) suggests usurpationary actions are aimed at biting into the resources and benefits enjoyed by the group of the eligible and often not sanctioned by the state because they are regarded as illegal by the status quo, while the exclusionary activities of the eligible are usually sanctioned and supported by the state. Hence, the group of the eligible, since its usurpationary activities are sanctioned by the state, relies heavily on the public mobilisation of members and supporters. Focusing on fake and fraudulent qualifications, this article demonstrates that fake qualifications, unlike informal arrangements associated with the informal economy, must not be seen as a hidden dimension of legitimate qualification systems. In the production and vending of fake qualifications the actors intentionally plan to deceive others and the formal education system. While the informal economy generally mitigates the bottlenecks to the formal economy and essentially serves good intentions, fake and fraudulent qualifications do not. Therefore, there is a need for robust regulatory frameworks to root out the phenomenon.

Using a methodology of case studies, this article examines cases drawn from southern Africa and beyond. Case studies from Europe and Asia are intended to show that falsity in higher education qualifications is not an African specialty. Three countries have been isolated from southern Africa, these being South Africa, Zimbabwe and Malawi. The primary factor used to select these countries was the extant evidence of fake qualifications. South Africa is a leading provider of higher education in Africa. Zimbabwe has over time enjoyed the reputation and perhaps until recently the status of being a beacon of hope in terms of what an African independent state could aspire to achieve and attain functional literacy (Shizha and Kariwo 2011). The inclusion of Malawi completes the cycle as it demonstrates the challenges facing higher education in peripheral and poor nations of the world. Access, quality and relevance, and governance and management are important challenges to the higher education sector in all three countries, which may otherwise and if not managed well, provide a festering

environment for the proliferation of fake qualifications among the growing unemployed youths.

The major sources of data used in this paper are various on-line news outlets. Drawing on these sources, the importance and power of the Internet in disseminating news and information on education opportunities and challenges is demonstrated. A Senate investigation of diploma mills in the United States of America showed that the Internet and new methods of communications make it easier to create and market bogus qualifications, along with legitimate education (Committee on Governmental Affairs United States Senate 2004). However, the main interest in turning to these sources for information is that the Internet and other new methods of communication provide a readily available resource, which is fairly accessible and verifiable globally thanks to the globalisation of Internet access. Critical though, is the effort put into isolate themes and how the respective resources have defined and treat falsity in academic and professional qualifications as newsworthy, and also locate the discourse on fake qualifications within the ambit of everyday forms of governance. Therefore, the proliferation of fake qualifications is both a governance and a political issue. Recognising the governance and political dimensions is a timely invitation to a serious reflection on the integrity, transparency and accountability of the management of education and training, especially the way qualifications are actually acquired and being used.

The Global Context of Fake Qualifications

Within higher education circles well-known illegitimate practices include plagiarism, cheating in examinations, student admission and placement malpractices (Eckstein 2003) as well as dubious awards of academic and professional qualifications associated with diploma mills; which in essence profit from deception and through disregard for the quality of the education they provided (Cooley and Cooley 2008). By definition, diploma mills are companies that sell degrees without requiring recipients to do any prescribed, substantial and appropriate coursework required to earn a qualification (Johnson 2006) at any particular level. Apparently, the connection between education and personal economic advantage drives a global market

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for higher education in which degree or diploma mills appear to meet the need for easy credentials (Gollin et al 2010). In essence, they represent a dark and hidden side of market forces subverting the norms and standards of certification pertaining in formal education and training. Paradoxically, similar dark episodes are evident in some legitimate institutions. Widespread misconduct affects university examinations and the conferring of academic credentials (Hallak and Poisson 2007), the fabrication and falsification of data (Anderson et al. 2013) and also in the procurement of goods and services and the licensing and accreditation of institutions. The array of areas infested by academic corruption confirms that academic fraud involves a variety of stakeholders: examination candidates, teaching or faculty members, supervisors, managers of courses, programmes, institutions, and universities. It has also been observed that entities in charge of quality assurance and accreditation are equally susceptible to corrupt practices, implying that accreditation may not guarantee academic quality (Hallak and Poisson 2007). Apparently, there are several layers of deceit that those seeking to obtain higher education on the one hand and employers recruiting higher education graduates to fill vacancies and sometimes applicants for promotion in the workplace on the other need to appreciate, manage and avoid.

Higher education awards are perceptively valued as a ladder to better and more rewarding career opportunities, especially in the emerging economies of Africa. Generally, Africa is experiencing a significant growth in higher education and the effects of the massification of higher education are further compounded by the globalisation of learning, training and education alluded to above. There is abundant evidence suggesting that degree qualifications assist in social mobility and result in both personal and public benefits. Benefits at the personal level include jobs, promotions for those who are already employed, higher pay, and social prestige (World Bank 1994; Thiaw 2007). In particular, higher education qualifications place individuals at an advantage in society and have the potential to shift social relations, including gender relations. Higher education, though it may not apply to possession of a qualification per se, enables citizens to understand difficult issues, make informed decision, and hold officials to account, which inevitably serve to assure the rise of an informed citizenry in a democratic society. Social and political empowerment are among the compelling reasons for increasing investment levels in higher

education and, ironically, the proliferation of fake qualifications. With the rise of the potential for social mobility comes the rising demand for higher education that effectively translates into a lucrative market for private, distance and online higher education providers. Unintentionally, with the rising demand for credentials, a credential society emerges in which class, status and social mobility become intricately linked to possession of a qualification. The temptation to acquire a degree or diploma by any means possible, other than studying for one, completes the cycle. In some instances, it is the genesis of fake qualifications issued by “diploma mills” while some are also linked to legitimate institutions and bogus accreditation agencies.

The difference may be hard to tell. Some public higher education institutions offer sub-standard education, sometimes under-resourced programmes and degrees without due diligence are offered with very little effort by way of corrective action. Therefore, a fundamental challenge arises, one of how to effectively root out a situation symptomatic of state failure, clandestine or not; and especially one that is also dispersed globally. Coincidentally, in many countries it is a serious offence to offer education or award qualifications outside the confines of the law. For example, in Australia it is considered a criminal offence, while in India institutions offering fake qualifications are considered fake and the qualifications not fit for employment. Some countries, the Netherlands and New Zealand for example, criminalise the unauthorised use of terms such as “degree” and “university.” Yet, in practice there are many actors operating outside the law and the globalisation of higher education implies that qualifications earned in one country may end up in another country where the holder may practice in a profession they are not fit for. Owing to globalisation, certificates are shipped around the world using post and courier and the Internet. It follows that activities of fraudulent providers of credentials are not bound by national territorial limits, nor by time and space aspects of social interactions. The Internet provides vistas of activity where fraudulent providers have indeed a global field of play and reach in real time. As has been shown by Cooley and Cooley (2008), there are relatively little deterrents to engage in fraudulent practices given the modes of communication which make it difficult for anyone to check the authenticity of the documents. Apparently, even if one is revealed as possessing a fake qualification in one place, a mere

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change of location or migration to another city or country may lead to a situation where the same qualification may pass off as legitimate.

First, fraudsters use names of existing and well-placed higher education institutions, for example, the University of Wolverhampton with a missing “p” or Manchester University for the University of Manchester, both names of universities in the United Kingdom; create or adopt well-known places though there could be no university by that name, for examples Chelsea, Canterbury and Grantchester universities (Garner 2015). Others deceptively adopt a college or university name that is similar to that of a legitimate institution, as reported for the United States of America in the case of Columbia State University, which approximates Columbia University, and Hamilton College, which becomes Hamilton University (Committee on Governmental Affairs United States Senate 2004). It has been shown that in some cases there is a tendency for fake institutions to cut and paste false grades and signatures on to certificates, which are then passed off as authentic to unsuspecting students, employers and recruiting agents. A fictitious institution known as Cambridge College of Learning (with no connection to the University of Cambridge) has been offering to overseas students business management and IT degree qualifications for fees ranging between £2,500 and £4,000 (Garner 2015). Legitimate providers of higher education have suffered heavily from plagiarism.

For Germany, the major concern has been plagiarism, mainly associated with postgraduate qualifications and the culprits include politically exposed persons (PEPs) or government ministers among regular students. Based on 2009 figures, out of an estimated 25,000 PhDs awarded every year by German universities, 1,000 are obtained through illicit means. The scandal has been fueled by the willingness of university lecturers to take bribes and admit unqualified students. It is the status associated with higher qualifications that entices many to take the unconventional path. In 2013, the University of Düsseldorf withdrew a doctoral degree awarded to the then minister of education following allegations and investigations related to alleged plagiarism and two years earlier, in 2011, the minister of defense was forced to resign on similar grounds (Altbach 2013). Similar experiences have been reported for Russia where since the end of the Soviet Union many government officials and business people have fallen into the “buy a dissertation scandal.” Some estimates indicate that 30 to 50 per

cent of academic degrees are not earned but purchased and many of the perceived legitimate PhDs have been shown to be unworthy due to high cases of plagiarism (Shuster 2013).

China, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, and Middle East countries provide important insights into the proliferation of fake qualifications in Asia. China is also considered one of the leading producers of bogus degrees, not just for customers in China, but across Asia and beyond. One company involved in the peddling of fake qualifications claims on its website that it is located in southern China's coastal city of Shenzhen, adjacent to Hong Kong and it is specialised in issuing fraudulent qualifications for higher education institutions in Australia, Britain, Canada, the United States, France, New Zealand, Singapore, Japan, Malaysia and other countries. In Qingdao, eastern Shandong province, police confiscated 7,000 fake certificates in March 2012, including forged certificates purchased by a construction company to earn its employees engineering credentials required to qualify for government contracts (Sharma 2012). For India, one of the most populous nations in the world, the printing of fake certificates has been described as a pan-India crime (Rediff News 2015). The police arrested a Delhi law minister on charges of cheating and fraud in obtaining a law degree, while other politicians from the ruling political party allegedly made contradictory declarations about their educational qualifications in election affidavits for 2004 and 2014. In a drive to eliminate fake law degrees, the Bar Council of India's scrutiny of qualifications of eligible voters in a highly contested election for leadership of the council, showed that close to half of the lawyers practicing in various courts in India had degrees which were of doubtful merit (Devraj 2017).

For Indonesia, in early 2015 the minister responsible for higher education observed that dozens of universities in Jakarta were selling fake diplomas to politicians. For this reason, a task force was set up to crack down on fake degrees issued mostly by private higher education institutions. Apparently, some law makers had obtained fake degrees in contravention of a National Education System Law (2003) which stipulated that those who issue, help issue or use fake degrees can face a maximum sentence of five years in prison or a fine (Walsh 2015; Jakarta Post 2015). Yet in another instance, a Pakistan IT firm known only as AXACT sold online degrees and diplomas to 200,000 people from the Gulf countries over a period

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of four years and for thousands of dollars per certificate. AXACT operated a sophisticated scam through which students could interact with their alleged professors without knowing that they were dealing with a bogus entity (Farooqui 2015). The political importance of fake qualification cannot be overemphasised. A constitutional amendment, which required that candidates for public office in Pakistan should hold university degrees, was appealed for political reasons after it was realised that the requirement encouraged the buying of university degrees. Ironically, when the Pakistani Supreme Court ordered that degree qualifications of elected candidates should be verified, instead of pursuing the offenders the constitution was amended to eliminate the degree requirement (Altbach 2013).

A Perspective on Southern Africa

Southern Africa comprises fifteen countries that are also members of the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC). SADC member states include Angola, Botswana, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, the United Republic of Tanzania, Swaziland, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Student enrolment in higher education in the SADC region is largely at the undergraduate level accounting for almost 70 per cent of total enrolments. At the postgraduate level, a larger proportion of students are enrolled in postgraduate programmes below the master's degree level. Postgraduate students represent 12 per cent of the total enrolment. South Africa accounts for the largest number of postgraduate students and it has been argued that if South Africa is removed from this list, then the proportion of undergraduate students increases to 87 per cent and the percentage of masters and doctoral enrolment drops to only 5 per cent (Wilson-Strydom and Fongwa 2012).

The region faces challenges common to many developing countries around the world related to ensuring access, equity, quality, efficiency and relevance in their educational and training policies and provisions (Wilson-Strydom and Fongwa 2012). More specific challenges include the following:

- a. shortages in the quantity and quality of student support services;
- b. a lack of teaching and learning infrastructure;

- c. inequitable access to education, especially affecting disadvantaged groups such as women, disabled people, and people from rural areas;
- d. limited access to high-level training and a mismatch in the supply and demand of skilled labour;
- e. a lack of comparable standards and qualifications across all training institutions and countries;
- f. a shortage of critical skills in key areas vital for higher productivity and competitiveness;
- g. the negative impact of the HIV and AIDS pandemic on the education and training sector;
- h. the high cost of education or training, especially in specialised fields such as medicine;
- i. the loss of educated and skilled personnel arising from the “brain drain”;
- j. the need for the education system to prepare students for employment opportunities in both rural and urban areas through the provision of relevant technical, vocational, entrepreneurial, and indigenous skills;
- k. the employability challenge associated with increased postsecondary enrolment without a corresponding improvement in graduate employability, that is, a disconnect between the number of graduates (and their qualifications) and the needs of employers; and
- l. low budget support of quality assurance work. A SARUA study of 2012 showed that although 83% of the participating universities reported having internal quality assurance procedures in place, only 56% have a budget available to support quality assurance work and only 69% of the universities reported make use of external examination procedures (Wilson-Strydom and Fongwa 2012).

In general terms, these conditions provide a festering ground where access is very low and the abrupt increase of access is a recipe for a lowering of quality, while those who feel left out of the system become attracted to alternative ways of acquiring the desired qualifications from cross-border providers notwithstanding challenges associated

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with the costs, quality and legality of the qualifications. As possession of a higher academic qualification has become a potent political tool, the importance of higher education qualifications permeate political practice as the situation in the three countries singled out for this analysis suggests.

Across the three countries an academic and professional qualification is deemed valid or genuine when it has been awarded by an institution legally authorised to award such qualifications. In Malawi and Zimbabwe public higher education institutions are granted the authority to offer degrees and diplomas by an Act of Parliament whilst private universities are granted a Charter (Republic of Malawi 2011; Garwe 2015). In all three countries, authentic qualifications are conferred upon satisfaction of minimum requirements and expectations as prescribed by the training providers. South Africa has a multilayer regulatory framework, where higher education institutions are registered by the Department for Education, accredited by the Council for Higher Education and credentials registered by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) on a National Qualifications Framework (NQF).

Despite these safeguards, across the three countries there are numerous cases of fake qualifications. It has been reported for South Africa that each day at least one high-ranking government official is exposed for having fake qualifications. A fake qualification from first degree to PhD could cost barely R1,000. However, according to SAQA, school-leaving certificates are the most faked qualification at 41%, followed by degrees at 32% and diplomas at 13% (Gernetzky 2015). Given the frequency of reported cases and the effect that the practice could have on the standing of higher education, the government of South Africa acknowledged the proliferation of fake qualifications as a serious threat to the credibility of its higher education system. It has also been shown that the use of fraudulent qualifications is widespread in the private and public sectors, reaching high levels as ambassadorial positions and apparently senior teaching and management positions of some higher education institutions (University World News 2015). Some allegations of the use of fake qualifications have culminated in court cases of fraud and uttering qualifications, as were the cases of an engineer working for South Africa's Passenger Rail Agency and a former KwaZulu-Natal police spokesperson (Areff 2015). Further,

a former South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) board chair claimed to have acquired a Bachelor of Commerce degree from the University of South Africa (UNISA) and a postgraduate degree in Labour Relations, but UNISA denied ever awarding her a degree. Five years earlier, in 2010, the then Minister of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs was exposed for not having a master's degree although he had listed among his qualifications a master's degree in political economy from the University of the Free State. It has also been shown for the former Sanral board chairperson, who stated on her CV that she received a master's degree in town planning from the University of KwaZulu Natal (UKZN), that she did not complete her studies. Further, a former ANC spokesman was forced to resign around 2009, following allegations of financial mismanagement and lies about postgraduate qualifications in theology purportedly earned from the University of Utrecht (Time Live 2014).

Zimbabwe has several cases of fake and fraudulent qualifications involving politically and non-politically exposed persons,¹ all of which have been shown to demean Zimbabwe's reputation as Africa's leading nation in terms of education attainment. Garwe (2015) attributed the rise in fake qualifications to a range of factors including the demand for higher education credentials, high unemployment rate, credentialism, and the desire for recognition and success. Writing about Lesotho, Tankie Khalanyane observed that it expresses the ideology that qualifications reflect in relative as well as absolute terms the expertise or attributes necessary for social ascent or the occupancy of elite roles. Therefore, its unintended consequence, especially in developing societies, is credential inflation or so-called diploma disease (Khalanyane 2012). For Zimbabwe, many top-ranking government officials have been reported to have honorary doctorates awarded by bogus universities (NewsDay 2014a).² The attractions of such awards include the prospects of easy doctorates or other post-graduate degrees, the potential use of the qualifications to solidify appointments in government service and the opportunity

1 The former resident's spouse is being investigated for acquiring a doctorate in the absence of the evidence of serious study for her PhD in sociology. Apparently, the doctoral degree was meant to boost her political prospects (NewsDay 2014).

2 The Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe (RBZ) governor was reported to have attained a PhD in Business Administration from Washington International University (WIU), which is an unaccredited institution of higher learning (NewsDay 2014a).

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to get promotions over and above the prestige associated with higher academic and professional qualifications (Garwe 2015).³

Malawi, on the other hand, has a low higher education participation rate of 0.4% of the eligible population against the average of 5% for sub-Saharan Africa, 17% for developing countries in general, and 24% for the world (University of Malawi 2012). Malawi has not been spared of the scourge of fraudulent academic and professional qualifications. First and foremost, the Technical, Education, Vocational and Entrepreneurial Training Authority (TEVETA) reported the existence of bogus providers of technical education operating between Malawi and the United Kingdom. Local training institutions and students registered with these entities and large sums of money have been lost in the process. One of the cases involving BP4,000 relates to the non-existent Global Education Connect and Trans-Atlantic College, as foreign providers who were later disowned by the British Council, and the African College and Bakhita Technical College (Pemba 2014). Off-shore unaccredited providers of education and training are eventually becoming major names, as holders of qualifications from the institutions assume various decision making positions in the public and private sectors. These institutions are not accredited and in some cases they are nothing but briefcase entities. Their mode of operation includes establishing partnerships with local institutions craving for international recognition. The irony is that they promise to confer international recognition to institutions struggling to gain local recognition. Their target is high ranking political actors, some of whom already hold academic and professional qualifications from fake or non-existent foreign institutions. It is evident that credentialism and aspiration for the status and privileges associated with various qualifications feed the curiosity associated with fake qualifications. Proposed amendments to electoral laws seek to set a degree as a required qualification for those aspiring for the position of president. The obvious result will be a rise in credentialism and there is a potential danger of the proliferation of fake degree qualifications among those aspiring for parliamentary seats and the presidency. Drawing on a variety of sources, Garwe (2015) suggested that credentialism is an ideology of social selection in which academic qualifications are

3 Zimbabwe unregistered one university, after it had already duped government officials, among them cabinet ministers, top police and army officers, permanent secretaries and directors, into believing that it was registered (Zimbabwean 2014).

perceived as providing measurable and sufficient indicators on one's expertise, aptitudes or attributes necessary to perform tasks, to give status or occupy élite positions. For Johnson (2006), however, the connection between credentialism and fake qualification is a direct one captured in the following phraseology: the employer pretends to need a degree; the employee pretends to have one.

Implications of Fake Qualifications

The process of obtaining and the negative implication of fake qualifications were eloquently described as follows:

Students may be looking for shortcuts to education credentials as they seek employment. Some students are misled by what is offered by degree mills, but others knowingly pay a significant fee in order to claim (falsely) that they have completed a legitimate course of study leading to reliable certification. Unscrupulous individuals respond, exploiting the current demand for higher education credentials in many countries. The Internet gives these individuals an instant platform from which to launch degree mills, which students often cannot readily distinguish from the online learning opportunities offered by legitimate institutions... Society is harmed when fraudulent credentials are issued in areas that put public health and safety at risk, e.g., engineering or the health-related professions. The international work of legitimate higher education providers – reliable evaluation of credentials, successful transfer of credit, reconciling differences in degree structure is undermined by degree mills (Council for Higher Education Accreditation and United Nations, Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation n.d.).

The attractions are many, given that higher education yields significant benefits for society through the development of a skilled workforce and educated citizenry; and to individuals through better and more rewarding employment opportunities and improved quality of life (World Bank 2004; Thiaw 2007; Garwe 2015). Fake qualifications, however, may not guarantee enjoyment of the same benefits even though vendors peddling in fake qualifications and individual holders may gain from it. The dangers for society and the economy are enormous as the fake certificates signify nothing and can be placed

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at the same level as counterfeit medicine and bank notes. The analogy with respect to counterfeit medicine, they may contain wrong or no active ingredients or they may have the right active ingredient but at the wrong dose, making it both ineffective and harmful to the patient and society. Like counterfeit medicine and counterfeit banknotes, fake qualifications are produced with the intent to deceptively represent the original. Lacking the legal authority of the state or the legitimate accreditation agency, fake qualifications are therefore one form of fraud. They may have the appearance of genuine qualifications but lack the essence of what they signify – the knowledge, skills, values and competences associated with appropriate doses of quality education and training. Some are issued by institutions that have the character of real and accredited universities or colleges, while others are utterly from bogus institutions that do not exist at all, or if they do, they would barely meet established standards of accredited colleges and universities. While some fake qualifications require awardees less study time to obtain, others are actually sold or bought and so do not require any meaningful coursework or research (Johnson 2006).

In terms of the financial costs involved, globally the fake and counterfeit qualifications business is a billion dollar industry. Some expert estimates suggest that the industry is worth five hundred million dollars (Garwe 2015), or higher as other estimates suggest five billion dollars a year. It follows that counterfeit or fake qualifications represent one of the lucrative opportunities for fraudsters. The globalisation and liberalisation of higher education, the advent of online education and open and distant learning (ODL) have created a festering environment where both legitimate and illegitimate higher education providers compete and thrive side by side in a context characterised by growing student international mobility and a competitive global market for jobs, the results of which include difficulties to tell which higher education providers and qualifications are illegitimate. This is a serious challenge associated with what has come to be known as the emergence of borderless education, also referred to as Cross-Border Higher Education (CBHE). The global response to fake qualifications has not been even. Some governments have turned a blind eye and so tacitly appear to permit the use of fake qualifications by allowing offenders to continue serving in positions of power and influence both in government and private business entities as some of the cases studies mentioned suggest. No wonder

that the incidence of fake and fraudulent qualifications has reached a crisis level.

Some universities, both public and private, have on their staff individuals with questionable credentials, suggesting that obtaining bogus degrees is tolerable. A pertinent question to consider is whether the status of such staff does not affect and reflect negatively on the credibility of the programmes and qualifications and the institutions themselves. In other words, can a holder of “fake” qualifications teach and supervise and confer in the broad sense knowledge and skills that are valid? Also, can an institution headed by a director, principal or vice chancellor who possesses and was perhaps recruited on the basis of “fake” credentials award legitimate degrees, diplomas or certificates? What are the implications for the academic legitimacy of graduates and for the higher education system at large where key policy decisions are made by officials who assumed such key positions upon presenting qualifications from unaccredited institutions?

It is obvious that fraudulent qualifications carry the risks of derailing national development and aspirations for a better future. It has been shown that the people who buy qualifications are motivated by prospects of getting jobs they are not necessarily qualified for. Some are also motivated by prospects of a pay increase or a rise in salaried income especially if they can demonstrate higher qualifications than what they currently have. It has been observed that years of schooling and diplomas or degrees help to ensure access to high-skill jobs which carry high socio-economic status. Since skills are often positively associated with socio-economic status, employers tend to value diplomas and degrees as indicating that employees bring high skilled levels to the labour market (Leiper 2003). Where promotion and salary increments are linked to the attainment of higher qualifications, the implication of fraudulent qualifications on employment offers and promotion decisions is that holders of fraudulent qualifications effectively disadvantage people who are actually qualified and would have been appointed or promoted. As fraudulent qualifications are generated by fraudulent institutions or individuals working for legitimate institutions, it is also pertinent to underscore the effect of fake qualifications on the legitimate institutions. Legitimate institutions whose degrees are faked and sold to people lose out in considerable terms. Due to the challenges associated with the risk of

qualifications pirated and debased, some institutions are compelled to invest in anti-counterfeit technology to ensure that their credentials are not easily forged. Effectively, money allocated to such measures could have been used for other purposes, for instance, to improve the state of infrastructure and services, to enhance the quality of the teaching and learning environment and perhaps to provide grants and scholarships to deserving students. Therefore, investment in anti-counterfeit technology is on the one hand a worthwhile expenditure but also one that could be redirected to improving the quality of education if the threats referred to above were minimal.

Some holders of fraudulent qualifications are unsuspecting victims. When discovered, the effect is not just the feeling of having lost money but lost hope, and, where the matter is in the public domain, loss of reputation acquired and built over many years. Where an individual holding a fraudulent qualification had used it to secure employment, the consequences could include avoidable errors and risks of various kinds. Employees with false qualifications may be unable to do a job they were hired for and they could also pose irreparable damage to the reputation of their employer. Within the education system the effects could include students taught by teachers who do not have the knowledge and skills and general competences required for the job. Where incompetence is not spotted early enough the damage could extend to generations of students denied the service of a qualified teacher and lecturer. The effects of hiring unqualified doctors or pilots on human life and public safety are enormous (Gollin et al. 2010). Graduates from legitimate institutions sometimes may have to cope with the challenge of having to work under incompetent managers who assumed high positions using fake degrees. The impact on academic institutions is particularly challenging given that questions are bound to be raised as to how such institutions could deserve public confidence to produce quality graduates, that is, graduates who could serve in various sectors of society and economy as teachers, doctors, nurses, engineers, security officers, among other professional fields.

Managing Illegitimate Qualifications

Managing fake qualifications is a legitimate cause in as much as it is an attempt to safeguard the value of legitimately acquired certificates.

This is critical, considering that certification is a “significant rite of passage” (Leiper 2003). The importance of the qualifications is enormous, given the rise of accelerated mobility facilitated recently by advances in technologies of mobility, communication and commerce, where institutions offering fake and fraudulent qualifications use means of payment that are also used for legitimate commerce. In the developing countries of southern Africa the challenge of fake qualifications is eventually growing bigger with the further liberalisation of higher education, which includes the rise of for-profit higher education institutions, cost-sharing arrangements and commercial fees for public higher education institutions, and the rise of open and distance learning and more generally cross-border higher education as alluded to earlier.

In this complex context, the providers of fake and fraudulent qualifications claim to overcome major costs posed by conventional education systems while also conferring the same benefits as rigorous programmes of study, which legitimate institutions could confer. The same challenge applies to the growing market for honorary titles awarded by institutions that are not accredited (Garwe 2015). It follows that the increase in tuition fees experienced recently in a number of southern African countries, which in South Africa to a large extent and other southern Africa countries as well as Malawi led to the “fees must fall” campaign among university students. Such calls may indirectly give merit to bogus claims by fake producers of qualifications. Therefore, like other parts of the world for southern Africa the major implication is how to manage the challenge posed by fake qualifications.

Notably, the cases mentioned above are representative of the geographic regions from which they have been picked and the sample indicates singly and collectively that managing fraudulent qualifications is a global challenge. The magnitude of this challenge and its associated consequences suggest the need for effective means of cross-checking not just the reliability of academic work within an institution and its national or regional education context but also its standards and practices in comparison to acceptable global standards. It is pertinent that authorities in the countries cited are taking a proactive role. For instance, the National Council for Higher Education in Malawi (NCHE) and the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE)

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have put in place measures to curb credential fraud. The measures include registration, accreditation, compliance visits and audits of all higher education institutions and programmes (see Garwe 2015 for Zimbabwe). The rationale of the proactive approach is the realisation that fake qualifications have a negative impact on the whole education system. As it was reported by Blade Nzimande, South Africa's minister of higher education:

Unless employers, institutions and citizens can feel confident that individuals have earned the qualifications that they purport to have, the entire system will lose legitimacy..... Even the qualifications of those who have obtained them legitimately will be treated with suspicion, and this is unfair to all those who have genuinely worked to acquire such qualifications (News24 2014).

Sometimes a general perception is that persons who misrepresent academic qualifications in order to get jobs in the public and private sector should be named, shamed and where possible jailed. The question not reflected upon has been how to deal with cases of persons, who are unemployed, self-employed or active in politics. It is argued here that to enhance the regulatory processes some measures should be adopted and earnestly implemented as itemised below:

1. The need for closer collaboration between the public and private sector and civic groups in fundamental ways to resolve the challenge posed by fake and fraudulent qualifications. On the civic front, the public should be sensitised adequately to understand the requirements for and the merits of institutional and programme accreditation.

2. Higher education institutions should develop effective regulatory mechanisms for screening and detecting fraudulent qualifications within their own ranks. The challenge, however, it is not always easy to check for authenticity of qualifications awarded by foreign institutions. It has been shown that chances are high that inquiries on the credibility of qualifications presented for a job may not be attended too speedily and sometimes the inquiries may never be attended to all.

3. Following on the steps taken by South Africa and other countries in the region and overseas, southern African countries should

introduce regulations on the evaluation of qualifications obtained from foreign institutions. Through the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) South Africa has introduced a stringent verification process for foreign qualifications. Such regulations should be complemented by powers to close illegal institutions operating within each country.

4. Employers should be on the look out for potential fraudsters and where in doubt there should be punitive action. When proven beyond doubt, there is a need to dismiss workers involved and also to collaborate with the state in legal actions in order to recover lost wages.

5. Regular announcement in the mass media of accredited colleges and universities could expose bogus tertiary institutions. Eventually, some could conform and those that may not do so close down.

6. All registered institutions should be monitored closely through regular academic audits, which will ensure quality of education and training but also support efforts to eliminate unorthodox practices in the production and issuing of academic qualifications.

7. Similarly, there is a need to standardise the curriculum as well as the teaching and learning processes.

8. A complementary approach is to strengthen record keeping in higher education institutions in order to contain the illicit production of certificates in legitimate institutions. For instance, institutions should digitise academic records as part of a drive against fake degrees and institutions. It has been reported for India that the government is creating a National Academic Depository, which will include authenticated academic records from 2016 onwards and all institutions, including school boards, will be expected to issue digitised certificates with digital signatures (Devraj 2017).

Conclusion

This article has provided a snapshot of the phenomenon of fake certificates and showed ways of preventing the proliferation and use of such qualifications. It has been shown that fake qualifications are acquired unlawfully either from illegitimate institutions or legitimate institutions through illegitimate means, and more generally from diploma mills. There is always an element of criminality, whether intended or not, which in terms of effect compounds the challenges besetting higher education and training to the extent that it compromises to a significant degree human resource training and development. The complication of fake qualifications extends beyond the feeling that they are part of growing academic corruption associated with the growth of access and participation in higher education worldwide (Council for Higher Education Accreditation and United Nations, Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation n.d.). Its challenges include effects on the transactional costs of delivering education, distorting decision making and deteriorating ethical standards and social values. Fake qualifications and titles are not earned and won due to hard work or the rigorous pursuit of academic and professional training, but the ability to pay (money) and the abuse of power, technology and sometimes influence. Higher education regulators must assume the additional challenge to oversee quality assurance processes in legitimate institutions as they have to spread their effort to containing and managing the incidence of fake qualifications. It is imperative for higher education institutions, regulatory bodies, employers and the general public to develop a keen interest in the subject and to cooperate in order to contain its consequences. Effective regulatory mechanisms, screening and detecting fraudulent activities within education establishments, as well as greater multi-stakeholder collaboration within and between countries are therefore necessary steps towards containing fake qualifications.

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