THE PROLIFERATION AND CONSEQUENCES OF FLY-BY-NIGHT HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN AFRICA

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ABSTRACT:

In recent years, unaccredited or "fly by night" higher education institutions have increasingly proliferated across Africa, presenting a complex challenge for students, employers, and national education systems. These institutions often operate without formal recognition from national quality assurance agencies, offering programmes that promise rapid degrees with minimal academic engagement or oversight. Students are frequently attracted by low entry barriers, flexible study options, and the allure of quick credentials, yet these advantages come at a significant cost. Through a qualitative document analysis of regulatory reports, media investigations, and policy discussions, this study explores the defining characteristics of these institutions and the consequences of student engagement with them. The findings reveal that students often incur substantial financial losses and receive qualifications that carry little value in employment markets or for further academic progression. Many also encounter obstacles in professional registration or admission to legitimate programmes, leading to frustration, delayed career paths, and eroded trust in formal education systems. While national regulatory bodies across African countries have implemented warnings, monitoring efforts, and closure campaigns, enforcement gaps and limited public awareness continue to enable the persistence of these providers. The study underscores the need for strengthened verification mechanisms, coordinated policy responses across borders, and comprehensive

educational campaigns to guide prospective students in distinguishing accredited institutions from fraudulent ones. Implications also extend to employers, who must implement reliable credential verification processes, and to policymakers, who are encouraged to foster regional cooperation in higher education quality assurance. By highlighting both systemic and individual-level impacts, this research contributes to understanding how unaccredited institutions affect the integrity, equity, and effectiveness of higher education across Africa.

KEYWORDS: Africa, credential verification, diploma mills, higher education accreditation, unaccredited institutions.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Across many African countries, higher education continues to function as a primary pathway to professional opportunity, economic participation, and upward social mobility, particularly for young people navigating constrained labour markets and persistent inequality (World Bank, 2023). For many households, obtaining a tertiary qualification is viewed not only as an individual achievement but also as a collective investment intended to secure long term economic stability and social recognition (UNESCO, 2021). This strong social and economic value attached to higher education has contributed to sustained growth in enrolments across public and private institutions on the continent, despite ongoing challenges related to funding, infrastructure, and capacity (African Development Bank, 2022). Demographic pressures further intensify this demand. Sub-Saharan Africa has the youngest population globally, with a rapidly expanding cohort of school leavers seeking access to post-school education and training (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2022). Public universities and accredited colleges are often unable to absorb this demand due to limited spaces, high entry requirements, and financial constraints, leaving many prospective students searching for alternative routes into higher education (World Bank, 2023). It is within this context of unmet demand that unaccredited or so-called fly by night higher education institutions have proliferated across several African countries.

Fly by night institutions are typically characterised by their operation outside formal regulatory frameworks, offering programmes that are not registered on national qualifications frameworks or recognised by statutory quality assurance bodies (Council on Higher Education, 2023). These providers often market themselves aggressively through online platforms, social media, and informal networks, presenting an appearance of legitimacy that can be difficult for prospective students to verify (South African Qualifications Authority, 2024). Promises of rapid degree completion, minimal admission requirements, and flexible

payment arrangements are frequently used to attract individuals who may be excluded from formal institutions or unaware of accreditation processes (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2023). In South Africa, regulatory authorities have repeatedly cautioned the public about the risks associated with enrolling at unregistered institutions. The Department of Higher Education and Training maintains an official register of public and private higher education institutions, while the South African Qualifications Authority oversees the registration of qualifications on the National Qualifications Framework (DHET, 2023; SAQA, 2024). Despite the availability of these verification mechanisms, cases continue to emerge in which students unknowingly enrol in programmes that carry no legal or professional recognition, resulting in financial loss and limited prospects for employment or further study (Council on Higher Education, 2024).

The persistence of fly by night institutions is not unique to South Africa and reflects broader continental governance challenges in regulating private higher education. Across Africa, quality assurance systems vary in strength and enforcement capacity, with some countries experiencing fragmented oversight and limited cross-border cooperation (UNESCO, 2021). This creates opportunities for illegitimate providers to operate transnationally, issuing qualifications that appear credible but lack formal recognition in any jurisdiction (African Development Bank, 2022). The problem is compounded by uneven public awareness of accreditation processes and by the high stakes attached to credential attainment in competitive labour markets (World Bank, 2023). The consequences of engagement with unaccredited institutions extend beyond individual students. Employers face increasing difficulty in assessing the validity of qualifications, which can undermine trust in higher education credentials more broadly (Council on Higher Education, 2023). Legitimate institutions may also suffer reputational harm when fraudulent providers mimic their names or branding, blurring distinctions between accredited and non-accredited education (SAQA, 2024). At a systemic level, the proliferation of bogus qualifications risks weakening national skills development strategies by producing credentials that do not correspond to recognised learning outcomes or labour market needs (UNESCO, 2021).

Within this broader context, the central concern of this paper is to examine how fly by night higher education institutions affect students and the wider educational ecosystem in Africa. The study is motivated by growing regulatory warnings and media reports that point to a persistent gap between policy intentions and on-the-ground realities in higher education governance (DHET, 2023; Council on Higher Education, 2024). While existing research acknowledges the existence of diploma mills and unaccredited providers, there remains

limited empirical and conceptual work that situates these institutions within African socio-economic and regulatory contexts (African Development Bank, 2022). The specific objectives of this study are threefold:

First, it seeks to map the defining features of fly by night higher education institutions in Africa, with particular attention to their modes of operation and recruitment practices.

Second, it aims to assess the impacts of these institutions on learners, employers, and labour markets, drawing on documented cases and regulatory evidence.

Third, the study considers potential policy and practice responses that could strengthen accreditation systems, enhance public awareness, and protect prospective students from exploitation.

Guided by these objectives, the study addresses the following research questions:

- *What characteristics distinguish fly by night higher education institutions from accredited providers within African contexts?*
- *What are the academic, economic, and social consequences of engagement with such institutions for students and other stakeholders?*
- *How can governments, quality assurance bodies, employers, and educational institutions work collectively to improve the legitimacy, transparency, and quality of higher education systems across the continent?*

By engaging these questions, the paper contributes to ongoing debates on higher education quality, regulation, and equity in Africa, while foregrounding the lived realities of students navigating complex and uneven post-school education landscapes (UNESCO, 2021; World Bank, 2023).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The international literature on diploma mills and fraudulent academic providers has expanded in recent years as higher education systems confront increasing marketisation, digital delivery models, and cross-border provision of qualifications (UNESCO, 2021). Diploma mills are commonly defined as entities that award academic degrees or certificates with little or no academic study, assessment, or quality assurance, while presenting themselves as legitimate higher education institutions (Eaton, 2023). Contemporary scholarship agrees that these entities are not accidental anomalies but rather structured operations that deliberately exploit regulatory loopholes and information asymmetries within national and global education

systems (Council for Higher Education Accreditation [CHEA], 2022). The persistence of diploma mills suggests that they thrive not only on weak enforcement but also on deep social demand for credentials as markers of competence and mobility (UNESCO, 2021).

A recurring theme in the literature is that diploma mills commodify higher education by reducing learning to a transactional exchange, where payment substitutes for academic engagement (Eaton, 2023). Studies argue that these providers often adopt the language, symbols, and institutional aesthetics of legitimate universities, including the use of academic regalia, honorary titles, and professional sounding accreditation bodies, to create an illusion of credibility (CHEA, 2022). The researcher notes that this mimicry complicates the ability of prospective students, employers, and even some regulators to distinguish legitimate institutions from fraudulent ones, particularly in contexts where higher education governance is already fragmented. The growth of online education has further intensified this challenge. While digital delivery has expanded access to learning globally, it has also enabled diploma mills to operate across borders with minimal physical presence, making detection and regulation more difficult (UNESCO, 2021). Eaton (2023) observes that diploma mills increasingly rely on sophisticated websites and targeted digital marketing strategies that appeal to adult learners, working professionals, and international students seeking flexible study options. The literature consistently warns that such practices blur the boundary between innovative education delivery and outright academic fraud, thereby placing additional strain on quality assurance systems. Historically, diploma mills have been shown to undermine the credibility of higher education qualifications by saturating labour markets with credentials that do not reflect genuine learning or competence (CHEA, 2022). Employers confronted with an influx of questionable qualifications may respond by devaluing degrees more generally or by imposing additional verification requirements, which can disadvantage graduates from legitimate but less well-resourced institutions (UNESCO, 2021). The researcher aligns with this concern, noting that the reputational damage caused by diploma mills extends beyond individual victims to affect entire national education systems.

Within African contexts, the literature reflects similar patterns while highlighting distinct structural and socio-economic vulnerabilities. Several studies indicate that unaccredited or fly by night institutions in Africa disproportionately target first-generation students, rural populations, and individuals from lower-income households who may lack access to reliable information about accreditation processes (World Bank, 2023). These institutions often present themselves as affordable and accessible alternatives to public universities, capitalising on widespread perceptions that formal higher education is elitist or unattainable

(African Development Bank, 2022). The researcher observes that such narratives resonate strongly in societies marked by historical exclusion and persistent inequality. National regulatory bodies across Africa have repeatedly cautioned against unaccredited providers. In South Africa, the Council on Higher Education and the South African Qualifications Authority have issued multiple public advisories warning that qualifications obtained from unregistered institutions are not recognised for employment, professional registration, or further study (Council on Higher Education, 2024; South African Qualifications Authority, 2024). Similar warnings are documented in Kenya, Nigeria, and Ghana, where regulatory agencies have identified dozens of illegal institutions operating without approval (UNESCO, 2021). Despite these efforts, the literature suggests that enforcement remains uneven, allowing fly by night institutions to close, rebrand, and reopen under new identities (World Bank, 2023).

A significant strand of the African literature focuses on the consequences for students who enrol in unaccredited programmes. Empirical studies and policy reports document cases of financial loss, emotional distress, and prolonged unemployment among graduates whose qualifications are rejected by employers or professional bodies (Council on Higher Education, 2024). The researcher notes that these outcomes are particularly damaging in contexts where households often pool scarce resources to fund a single family member's education, expecting future economic returns (African Development Bank, 2022). When such expectations are unmet, the social costs extend beyond the individual to entire families and communities. Labour market implications are also prominent in the literature. Employers faced with fraudulent or unverifiable qualifications may become sceptical of academic credentials altogether, leading to increased reliance on informal networks or experiential indicators when hiring (World Bank, 2023). This shift can disadvantage qualified graduates who lack social capital, thereby reinforcing inequality rather than alleviating it. The researcher argues that this dynamic illustrates how diploma mills indirectly distort labour market signalling mechanisms, undermining the very purpose of higher education credentials. Beyond individual and economic impacts, the literature highlights broader systemic consequences. The proliferation of unaccredited institutions can weaken national quality assurance regimes by overwhelming regulatory capacity and diverting resources from developmental support for legitimate institutions (UNESCO, 2021). In countries with limited funding for higher education oversight, regulators often prioritise compliance monitoring over proactive quality enhancement, creating an environment where fraudulent providers can

operate on the margins (African Development Bank, 2022). The researcher finds that this reactive approach, while necessary, is insufficient to address the root causes of the problem. Another emerging theme in recent literature is the cross-border dimension of fly by night institutions in Africa. Some providers claim international accreditation or partnerships with foreign universities that are either unrecognised or entirely fictitious (CHEA, 2022). UNESCO (2021) notes that the absence of harmonised continental frameworks for higher education accreditation allows such claims to go unchallenged, particularly when students are unfamiliar with international quality assurance structures. The researcher views this as a critical governance gap that requires stronger regional cooperation through bodies such as the African Union and regional quality assurance networks. The literature also interrogates the role of policy environments in enabling or constraining unaccredited provision. In some African countries, liberalisation policies aimed at expanding private higher education have unintentionally lowered barriers to entry for providers without adequate safeguards (World Bank, 2023). While private sector participation has increased access and innovation, weak licensing and monitoring processes have created opportunities for exploitation (African Development Bank, 2022). The researcher does not oppose private higher education expansion but argues that access without quality assurance risks reproducing educational inequality under the guise of inclusion. Public awareness emerges as another critical factor. Studies consistently show that many students lack basic knowledge about how to verify institutional accreditation or qualification registration (South African Qualifications Authority, 2024). Information is often available on official websites, yet digital literacy gaps and mistrust of government institutions limit its effective use (UNESCO, 2021). The researcher suggests that awareness campaigns must go beyond static lists of accredited institutions and engage communities through schools, workplaces, and local media to build shared understanding of quality assurance.

The literature further explores the ethical dimensions of diploma mills and fly by night institutions. Some scholars argue that these providers engage in predatory practices by deliberately misleading students, while others note that demand-side pressures and structural exclusion complicate simplistic moral judgments (Eaton, 2023). The researcher aligns with a nuanced perspective, recognising that while fraudulent providers bear primary responsibility, systemic failures in access, funding, and communication also contribute to their persistence. This view expands the debate beyond enforcement toward broader questions of social justice in higher education. Recent African scholarship has begun to call for a shift from purely punitive regulatory approaches to more integrated strategies that combine enforcement with

capacity building and system-wide reform (Council on Higher Education, 2024). Recommendations include strengthening data sharing between national qualification authorities, investing in regulatory staff training, and aligning higher education planning with labour market needs (World Bank, 2023). The researcher supports these proposals but emphasises that without addressing underlying demand pressures, such measures may have limited long-term impact.

A notable gap in the literature relates to the lived experiences of students affected by fly by night institutions. While policy reports document outcomes, fewer empirical studies capture the narratives of learners who navigate these institutions and their aftermath (UNESCO, 2021). The researcher identifies this as a critical omission, as understanding student decision-making processes could inform more effective prevention strategies. Additionally, limited research examines how employers interpret and respond to questionable qualifications in practice, particularly in informal labour markets common across Africa (World Bank, 2023). In synthesising the literature, the researcher adopts a critical but constructive stance. The evidence strongly supports the view that diploma mills and unaccredited institutions undermine educational quality, equity, and trust, and therefore warrant decisive regulatory action (CHEA, 2022; Council on Higher Education, 2024). At the same time, the literature suggests that these institutions are symptoms of deeper structural challenges, including limited access to accredited education, high youth unemployment, and the symbolic power of credentials in stratified societies (African Development Bank, 2022; UNESCO, 2021). Addressing the problem requires not only shutting down fraudulent providers but also expanding credible pathways into higher education and work.

In conclusion, recent literature demonstrates that fly by night higher education institutions represent a multifaceted challenge that intersects with governance, labour markets, and social inequality in Africa. The researcher contributes to this body of work by emphasising the need to situate regulatory responses within broader socio-economic contexts and by advocating for a balanced approach that combines enforcement, public education, and systemic reform. This perspective aligns with emerging global calls to reimagine higher education as a public good anchored in quality, trust, and inclusive opportunity, rather than as a commodity vulnerable to exploitation (UNESCO, 2021).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored in credentialism theory, which explains how educational qualifications function as social signals that communicate competence, legitimacy, and employability within labour markets (Brown & Souto-Otero, 2020). Credentialism suggests that degrees

and certificates operate not only as indicators of skills but also as symbolic markers that structure access to employment, professional status, and social mobility (Bills, 2021). In many contemporary labour markets, the credential itself increasingly outweighs the substantive learning it is meant to represent, particularly where employers rely on qualifications as screening tools in contexts of high unemployment and oversupply of labour (Brown et al., 2023). Within this framework, higher education credentials acquire value because they are assumed to reflect regulated learning processes, quality assurance mechanisms, and standardised outcomes (OECD, 2021). Credentialism theory is particularly useful for understanding why the proliferation of unaccredited or fly by night institutions poses systemic risks. When fraudulent or substandard providers flood the market with easily obtained qualifications, the signalling function of legitimate credentials is weakened, creating uncertainty for employers and graduates alike (Bills, 2021). The researcher adopts the view that this erosion of trust represents a core structural harm caused by unaccredited institutions, extending beyond individual deception to broader labour market distortion.

Credentialism theory also helps explain individual decision-making in environments characterised by scarcity and competition. In many African contexts, formal employment opportunities are limited, and possession of a recognised qualification is often perceived as a minimum requirement for entry into professional spaces (World Bank, 2023). Under such conditions, individuals may prioritise speed, affordability, and accessibility over institutional legitimacy, even when they are vaguely aware of accreditation risks (Brown & Souto-Otero, 2020). The researcher interprets this behaviour not simply as naivety but as a rational response to structural pressure, where credentials are viewed as survival tools rather than reflections of learning. The theory further illuminates the socio-economic consequences of widespread credential inflation. As the number of questionable qualifications increases, employers may raise credential thresholds or introduce additional screening mechanisms, such as work experience requirements or internal testing, to compensate for uncertainty (OECD, 2021). This response often disadvantages graduates from legitimate but less prestigious institutions and reinforces existing inequalities within labour markets (Brown et al., 2023). The researcher aligns with this strand of literature, arguing that fly by night institutions indirectly deepen inequality by undermining the reliability of formal qualifications as neutral signals of competence.

Importantly, credentialism theory situates the problem of unaccredited institutions within broader debates about the commodification of education. When qualifications are treated primarily as exchangeable goods rather than developmental processes, the conditions are

created for fraudulent providers to thrive (Bills, 2021). The researcher therefore uses credentialism not only as an explanatory lens but also as a critical framework that highlights tensions between education as a public good and education as a market commodity, particularly in resource-constrained African systems (UNESCO, 2021).

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative document analysis methodology to examine the characteristics, impacts, and regulatory responses associated with fly by night higher education institutions in Africa. Qualitative document analysis is well suited to studies that seek to interpret policy positions, institutional narratives, and public discourses without direct engagement with human participants (Bowen, 2020). The researcher selected this approach to enable a systematic examination of existing, publicly available data while avoiding ethical risks associated with primary data collection.

Data sources consisted of official regulatory statements issued by higher education authorities, national qualifications bodies, and ministries responsible for post-school education across selected African contexts, with particular emphasis on South Africa. These were complemented by policy briefs, parliamentary submissions, and public advisories that address unaccredited institutions and fraudulent qualifications (Council on Higher Education, 2024; South African Qualifications Authority, 2024). Investigative media reports from reputable national news outlets were also included to capture documented cases of institutional malpractice and student experiences (World Bank, 2023).

Documents were selected using purposive sampling based on their direct relevance to unaccredited higher education provision, credential fraud, and quality assurance mechanisms. Inclusion criteria required that documents be produced within the last five years, originate from verifiable institutions or recognised media platforms, and explicitly address the phenomenon of fly by night providers or diploma mills (Bowen, 2020). This ensured that the analysis reflected current regulatory environments and contemporary challenges facing African higher education systems.

Thematic analysis was applied to the selected documents to identify recurring patterns and dominant themes related to institutional practices, regulatory capacity, student vulnerability, and labour market implications. The researcher followed an iterative coding process, beginning with open coding to identify key concepts, followed by axial coding to establish relationships between themes (Bowen, 2020). Particular attention was paid to how regulatory

bodies frame risk, responsibility, and prevention, as well as how media narratives portray affected students and institutional accountability.

This methodological approach does not involve interaction with human subjects, personal data collection, or experimental intervention. All data analysed are publicly available and already in the public domain. Consequently, the study does not require ethical clearance under standard institutional research ethics guidelines, which typically apply to research involving human participants, sensitive personal information, or direct observation (UNESCO, 2021). The researcher nevertheless adhered to principles of academic integrity by accurately representing sources, avoiding misinterpretation, and ensuring transparency in data selection and analysis.

While document analysis has limitations, including reliance on existing narratives and potential institutional bias, it provides a robust foundation for understanding systemic patterns and regulatory discourses surrounding fly by night institutions (Bowen, 2020). The researcher views this methodology as appropriate for establishing a credible, policy-relevant analysis that can inform future empirical research involving students, employers, and institutional actors.

RESULTS

The document analysis revealed a set of recurring and interconnected patterns that illuminate how fly by night higher education institutions operate, who they affect, and why they persist across African higher education systems. These findings are organised around institutional legitimacy, student outcomes, regulatory responses, and systemic vulnerabilities within national qualification ecosystems.

Lack of Formal Recognition and Qualification Registration

A dominant theme across all reviewed regulatory documents is that fly by night institutions operate outside legally established higher education frameworks. These institutions typically lack registration with national departments responsible for higher education oversight and offer programmes that are not registered on official national qualifications frameworks (Council on Higher Education [CHE], 2024). In South Africa, for instance, higher education providers are legally required to be registered with the Department of Higher Education and Training and to offer qualifications registered on the National Qualifications Framework through the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA, 2024). Institutions that fail to meet these criteria are deemed illegal, and qualifications issued by them are not recognised

for employment, further study, or professional registration. Comparable findings were evident in other African contexts. Regulatory reports from Kenya, Nigeria, and Ghana similarly indicate the existence of institutions offering degrees and diplomas without approval from national commissions for university education or equivalent bodies (UNESCO, 2021). These institutions often claim accreditation from fictitious international agencies or from bodies that lack legal authority within national jurisdictions, thereby creating an illusion of legitimacy for prospective students (Council for Higher Education Accreditation [CHEA], 2022). The researcher observes that a key feature of fly by night institutions is their strategic ambiguity. Rather than explicitly claiming local accreditation, they frequently use vague language such as "internationally recognised" or "globally accredited," which exploits limited public understanding of accreditation systems (SAQA, 2024). This ambiguity allows such institutions to avoid direct regulatory scrutiny while continuing to recruit students. The results therefore confirm that lack of formal recognition is not incidental but central to the business model of fly by night providers.

Misrepresentation and the Simulation of Legitimacy

The analysis further revealed that fly by night institutions often engage in sophisticated forms of misrepresentation. Investigative reports document the use of professional-looking websites, academic titles, graduation ceremonies, and even physical campuses to simulate the appearance of legitimate universities (CHEA, 2022). These practices are particularly effective in contexts where students equate visible infrastructure and ceremonial practices with institutional credibility (UNESCO, 2021). Several regulatory advisories note that some institutions deliberately mimic the names or logos of registered universities to confuse prospective students (CHE, 2024). Others claim affiliations with foreign universities that, upon verification, either do not exist or have no formal relationship with the provider. The researcher interprets these practices as evidence that fly by night institutions rely on symbolic legitimacy rather than substantive academic quality. This simulation of legitimacy has serious consequences for quality assurance systems. When fraudulent providers closely resemble legitimate institutions, regulators are forced into reactive enforcement rather than proactive quality development (World Bank, 2023). The findings suggest that the more sophisticated the deception, the more resource-intensive the regulatory response becomes.

Student Experiences and Educational Harm

A consistent finding across media investigations and regulatory reports is the significant harm experienced by students who enrol in fly by night institutions. Students frequently report financial losses resulting from tuition fees paid for qualifications that later prove unusable (Council on Higher Education, 2024). In many African households, education represents a substantial financial investment, often funded through family savings, informal loans, or community contributions (African Development Bank, 2022). When qualifications are rejected by employers or universities, the economic consequences extend beyond the individual student to entire families. In addition to financial loss, students experience emotional distress, loss of confidence, and delayed career progression when they discover that their qualifications are not recognised (UNESCO, 2021). Regulatory reports document cases where graduates are denied admission to postgraduate programmes or excluded from professional councils after years of study (SAQA, 2024). The researcher notes that these outcomes reinforce feelings of betrayal and disillusionment with formal education systems. Importantly, the analysis shows that students are not always unaware of the risks. Some reports indicate that students knowingly choose questionable providers due to affordability, flexible entry requirements, or desperation to obtain credentials quickly (World Bank, 2023). This finding complicates narratives that frame students solely as victims and highlights the structural pressures that shape educational decision-making in contexts of high unemployment and limited access to accredited institutions.

Labour Market Consequences

The results also demonstrate that the impact of fly by night institutions extends into labour markets. Employers increasingly report difficulties verifying the authenticity of qualifications, leading to heightened scepticism toward academic credentials in general (OECD, 2021). In response, some employers introduce additional screening measures, such as internal assessments or probationary employment periods, to mitigate the risk of hiring underqualified candidates (World Bank, 2023). While such measures may protect employers, they can disadvantage graduates from legitimate but less prestigious institutions who lack social networks or institutional reputation (Brown et al., 2023). The researcher observes that this dynamic contributes to credential inflation, where higher and higher qualifications are required for entry-level positions, even when job tasks do not justify such requirements. The findings therefore confirm that fly by night institutions distort labour market signalling mechanisms by weakening the assumed link between qualifications and competence. This

distortion undermines the efficiency and fairness of employment systems and exacerbates inequality.

Regulatory Responses and Enforcement Challenges

Across African contexts, regulatory bodies are actively engaged in identifying and shutting down unaccredited institutions. Public notices, institutional registers, and verification tools are widely used to inform the public about legitimate providers (CHE, 2024; SAQA, 2024). In some cases, authorities have successfully prosecuted illegal providers and closed campuses operating without permission (UNESCO, 2021). Despite these efforts, enforcement challenges persist. One recurring issue is the ability of fly by night institutions to rebrand and reopen under new names following regulatory intervention (World Bank, 2023). Limited regulatory capacity, especially in under-resourced systems, further constrains sustained monitoring and enforcement (African Development Bank, 2022). Public awareness campaigns also show uneven effectiveness. Although verification tools exist, many students remain unaware of how to use them or mistrust official sources of information (SAQA, 2024). The results therefore suggest that regulatory action alone is insufficient to address the problem.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study underscore the deeply systemic nature of fly by night higher education institutions in Africa. Rather than representing isolated cases of fraud, these institutions reflect broader tensions within higher education systems characterised by unmet demand, economic inequality, and credential-driven labour markets (UNESCO, 2021). The researcher interprets the persistence of fly by night institutions as both a governance failure and a symptom of structural exclusion.

Individual and Social Implications

At the individual level, engagement with unaccredited institutions carries significant personal risk. Students invest time, money, and emotional energy into programmes that do not yield recognised credentials, resulting in delayed employment and diminished trust in education systems (Council on Higher Education, 2024). In societies where education is widely viewed as a pathway out of poverty, such outcomes can be devastating. Socially, the proliferation of fraudulent qualifications erodes confidence in higher education as a public good. When employers and institutions cannot rely on credentials as indicators of competence, the social contract underpinning education weakens (UNESCO, 2021). The researcher argues that this

erosion disproportionately affects already marginalised groups, who rely most heavily on formal credentials to access opportunity.

Systemic and Institutional Consequences

At a system level, fly by night institutions place strain on quality assurance mechanisms and divert regulatory attention from developmental priorities (African Development Bank, 2022). Regulators are forced to focus on policing illegality rather than supporting quality improvement in legitimate institutions. This reactive posture undermines long-term system strengthening. The findings also highlight the reputational risks faced by national higher education sectors. International recognition of qualifications depends on trust in national quality assurance systems (OECD, 2021). When unaccredited providers proliferate, they jeopardise this trust and potentially affect the global mobility of graduates from legitimate institutions.

Policy Implications and the Researcher's Position

The researcher supports calls for stronger regulatory enforcement but argues that punitive approaches alone are insufficient. While shutting down illegal providers is necessary, it does not address the demand conditions that allow them to thrive (World Bank, 2023). Improving access to affordable, accredited education is therefore central to any sustainable solution. Cross-border cooperation is also essential. The researcher supports regional initiatives aimed at harmonising qualification frameworks and sharing data on fraudulent providers (UNESCO, 2021). Without such cooperation, fly by night institutions will continue to exploit jurisdictional gaps. Public education must also be reimagined. Rather than relying solely on institutional registers, awareness strategies should engage schools, community organisations, and employers to build collective understanding of accreditation and quality assurance (SAQA, 2024). The researcher views public literacy about higher education governance as a critical but underdeveloped area of policy intervention.

Contribution to the Literature

This study contributes to the literature by situating fly by night institutions within broader socio-economic and credentialist dynamics rather than treating them solely as criminal anomalies. The researcher introduces a structural interpretation that recognises student agency while foregrounding systemic constraints. Future research should prioritise qualitative studies of student decision-making and employer verification practices to deepen understanding of how unaccredited credentials circulate within labour markets (World Bank,

2023). Such research would strengthen evidence-based policy design and support more equitable higher education systems.

CONCLUSION

Fly by night higher education institutions in Africa represent a multifaceted challenge that goes beyond isolated incidents of fraud. These institutions thrive in environments where demand for higher education outstrips the capacity of legitimate providers and where students, often facing financial and social pressures, seek rapid and affordable routes to credentials. By offering qualifications without the rigour, oversight, or recognition associated with accredited programmes, these providers create a situation where the value of formal education is diluted. Students frequently bear the brunt of these practices, investing significant time, money, and effort into programmes that do not yield the professional or academic outcomes they were promised. The resulting financial loss, delayed career progression, and emotional stress can have long-lasting effects on individuals and their families.

The impact of fly by night institutions also extends to the broader higher education system. Legitimate universities and colleges face reputational risks when fraudulent providers mimic their branding or operate under similar names. Employers, in turn, must invest additional resources to verify qualifications and ensure that hiring decisions are based on genuine competence. This dynamic undermines trust in the credentialing system and complicates workforce planning, particularly in sectors where specific qualifications are prerequisites for professional practice. Over time, the proliferation of unaccredited institutions can weaken the perceived integrity of entire national education systems, eroding confidence both domestically and internationally. Addressing this challenge requires a combination of regulatory, educational, and structural strategies. Strong and sustained enforcement of existing regulations is essential to deter fraudulent operators and to close loopholes that allow them to reappear under different names. However, enforcement alone is insufficient if students remain unaware of the importance of accreditation or lack access to reliable information. Public awareness campaigns that clearly communicate how to verify legitimate institutions and qualifications are crucial to equipping prospective students with the tools to make informed decisions. At the same time, improving access to accredited higher education, through expanded capacity, flexible delivery models, and financial support, can reduce the appeal of unaccredited providers by offering legitimate alternatives that meet students' needs for accessibility and affordability.

The researcher also recognises the need for a proactive approach that considers the broader social and economic pressures driving students toward fly by night institutions. Structural inequalities, limited opportunities for quality education, and the high stakes attached to credential attainment all contribute to the demand for rapid, low-barrier qualifications. Addressing these underlying factors requires policies that expand opportunities for equitable participation in higher education while maintaining rigorous standards of quality and recognition. Future research should move beyond documenting the prevalence of unaccredited providers to exploring the effectiveness of specific policy interventions, such as public verification platforms, cross-border regulatory cooperation, and awareness campaigns. Additionally, research that captures the lived experiences of students who have engaged with fly by night institutions would provide valuable insight into decision-making processes, motivations, and coping strategies, enabling policymakers and educators to design more responsive and targeted interventions.

In conclusion, fly by night higher education institutions are more than a regulatory inconvenience; they are a symptom of systemic pressures and gaps within African higher education. Tackling this challenge requires a balanced and holistic approach that safeguards the credibility of qualifications, protects students from exploitation, and strengthens the overall integrity of national education systems. By combining enforcement, education, and expanded legitimate opportunities, African higher education systems can preserve the social and economic value of academic credentials and ensure that higher education continues to serve as a genuine pathway to professional and personal advancement.

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