Universities Australia is leading a transnational initiative that will help combat fraudulent degree mills by converting paper-based credentials into a secure digital repository that will give students and employers verified evidence of legitimate academic qualifications and boost student mobility and data portability.

The digital student data project will benefit students and universities, said Anthony Manahan, a student services analyst from the University of Melbourne who is leading the project.

Speaking to a higher education compliance and quality conference in Melbourne last week, Mr Manahan said the project would protect genuine qualifications.

“It will vastly improve the integrity and security of higher education qualifications because third parties will be able to access verified documents without having to produce hard copies,” he said. “While reducing opportunities for fraud and counterfeit qualifications, the program will also enhance student mobility and portability because students can access their records from a central repository no matter where they are.

“It will also lead to significant efficiency gains by eliminating the need for universities to search for individual degrees and testamurs as requests arise and it will make the whole mechanism for studying abroad a lot easier for both students and staff while reducing administration costs.”

The project has the support of every university which have contributed $200,000 for the discovery phase. Most New Zealand universities are also involved. Mr Manahan said the next phase would be software development and working out how to connect the repository to individual university academic record systems.

Mr Manahan said more funding must be raised before the next phase can get under way and he will take a business case to the next UA meeting of deputy vice-chancellors (corporate) in March.
Ultimately, the project would be rolled out to all higher education providers, as well as vocational education and schools, Mr Manahan said. He hopes for an early 2017 start.