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Analysis of accreditation standards for medical programmes in Argentina

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Abstract

The evaluation of the quality of higher education is a key issue that involves a diverse array of factors, factors which encourage the revision of policies and systems of accreditation, both of which are systematic and well-established processes in Argentina. The accreditation of an undergraduate programme of study consists of recognition based on certain standards and minimum quality criteria which have been previously determined. This research analyses the makeup of accreditation standards for medical programmes in Argentina. The results demonstrate differences in the makeup of standards in terms of the quantity and distribution of objects of evaluation and variables associated with each other. In addition, we identified a lack of order of appearance of the different objects and related variables in the standards, with certain objects of evaluation being evaluated, followed by others, while afterwards there is a return to these same objects in subsequent standards.

Keywords: Standards, accreditation, makeup, undergraduate, medicine.

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1. Introduction

1.1. The issue of the evaluation of quality of higher education

Evaluation of the quality of higher education is a key issue that involves political, social and economic factors, factors which encourage the revision of policies and systems of accreditation, both of which are systematic and well-established processes in Argentina (Corengia, Del Bello, Durand & Pita, 2013).

In the area of higher education, quality includes, among other components, the evaluation and accreditation of programmes of study, which can be defined as recognition based on certain standards and minimum quality criteria which have been previously determined. This means that through the use of processes of evaluation over time, the education of professionals and the professional profile desired to be reached by each individual university will be of increasingly greater quality. As such, processes of quality become mechanisms that guarantee that an institution, programme of study or other dimension complies with minimum established indicators (Salas Perea, 2000).

Although evaluation and accreditation are themselves practices which are indeed linked, they imply processes of different natures. While evaluation is developed in order to understand the functioning of educational projects and their results within a framework of objectives and internal contexts leading to improvement, accreditation implies the establishment of criteria external to particular projects with the aim of comparing them and making qualitative judgements about them (Etcheverry, 2005).

The accreditation process for a university degree programme is the recognition awarded by either a governmental or private agency recognised by the State, conducted by experts in each field, so as to ensure that each degree programme reaches predetermined standards of academic quality. Notwithstanding the objective that the evaluation seeks to fulfill, it must always include the most clear and measurable criteria and standards possible, so that evaluators are able to make judgement values that indicate precisely that these criteria have been reached by the degree programme or by an institution (Villazon & De Pauw, 2009).

This work seeks to contribute to the improvement of the formulation of evaluation and accreditation standards for degree programmes in Argentina.

To this effect, we carry out and present an analysis of current accreditation standards for undergraduate degrees in Medicine in Argentina in accordance with Ministerial resolution RM N°1314/07.

1.2. Standards of quality

All accreditation implies both the elaboration and use of quality standards, which can be defined as constructions of reference or theoretical constructs established and agreed upon to ensure both confidence in daily actions and appropriate levels of confidence in a given system of evaluation (Casassus, 1997; International Conference for university students, 2015).

The creation of standards should be an expression of the consensus that the idea of the quality of the object of evaluation and its variables represents. As such, processes for the elaboration of standards rest upon committees of experts. Individuals or representatives of the institutions or programmes to be evaluated may participate in these committees, with the understanding that processes of evaluation imply a vision of improvement (Jornet, Perales & Paez, 2005).

When formulating standards, some criteria, which include the following, must be taken into account: that they focus on key ideas and, as such, tend to be grouped into dimensions; that they are observable, in other words that the presence or absence of compliance with said criteria can be verified; that they form a coherent whole under a concept that makes sense for the evaluation in question; and, preferably, that they are not prescriptive, so as to avoid the adoption of some strategies to the

detriment of others. In addition, in order to be able to be applied in a process of evaluation, criteria must result in a set of empirically observable variables that provide information, either qualitative or quantitative, through the use of indicators (Avalos, 2008). An indicator is a specific, explicit, objective and verifiable measurement. Value judgements of the object to be evaluated are made based on these indicators. Nevertheless, though these indicators do provide the quantitative referential framework, they help to bring forth a description of the qualitative components of the object of study. They are defined in the first place as a quantitative tool, but qualitative indicators, both direct and indirect, also exist (Abarca Fernandez, 2009).

According to J. Almohalla, the three main dimensions can be identified under which characteristics to be taken into account for the formulation of indicators that can be grouped: construct characteristics, measurement conditions and formal conditions. Construct characteristics make reference to the relationship between the indicator and the object being referred to; measurement requirements suppose the existence of a predictive inference component; formal requirements have to do with the way in which indicators are expressed, so that they may be utilised in the most operative way possible (Almohalla, 2012).

2. Objectives

2.1. General objective

To analyse the composition of accreditation standards for undergraduate medical programmes in Argentina.

2.2. Specific objectives

To determine the composition of accreditation standards for undergraduate medical programmes, taking into account the number, type and distribution of objects of evaluation and variables that make them up.

3. Methodology

The present work is an evaluative study of exploratory character, both qualitative and quantitative, and of a descriptive–interpretative nature (Hernandez Sampieri, 2010).

It is based on a documentary analysis of the Ministerial resolution that sets accreditation standards for medical degree programmes in Argentina.

To this effect, we used the Atlas.ti program to codify the number and type of objects of evaluation and variables included within them in each of the five dimensions that these address: institutional context, programme of study, academic body, students and graduates and infrastructure and equipment.

We coded objects of evaluation “oe”, nominal variables of objects of evaluation “vn” and quantitative variables of objects of evaluation “vc”. We placed the number corresponding to the standard to which each component belonged before the acronym.

After having completed this coding, we proceeded to determine the total quantity of oe, vn and vc that made up each of the standards.

Finally, we established semantic networks for each dimension as the programme allows networks which provided an objective view of the distribution of standards, oe, vn and vc in the different dimensions.

4. Results

4.1. Analysis of the composition of accreditation standards

Based on our analysis, we determined the structure of each dimension and the composition of its standards. For the institutional context dimension, we identified 15 standards, 19 objects of evaluation (oe), 68 nominal variables of objects of evaluation (vn), one quantitative variable of object of evaluation (vc) and 93 relationships between objects of evaluation and variables. For the programme of study dimension, we identified 26 standards, 43 oe, 81 vn, 4 vc and 126 relationships between objects of evaluation and variables. For the academic body dimension, we identified seven standards, 7 oe, 22 vn and 25 relationships between objects of evaluation and variables. For the students and graduates dimension, we counted four standards, 15 oe, 14 vn, 2 vc and 26 relationships between objects of evaluation and variables. Finally, the infrastructure and equipment dimension was made up of 15 standards, 19 oe, 39 vn, 3 vc and 57 relationships between objects of evaluation and variables.

5. Conclusions

Taking into account the results we obtained, we identified differences in the number of standards established for each dimension, a disproportion that we also observed across the different dimensions both in terms of the quantity of objects of evaluation and quantity of variables associated with each other.

Additionally, we observed a lack of order of appearance for the different objects and related variables in the standards. In some dimensions, certain objects of evaluation are evaluated, followed by others, while afterwards there is a return to these same objects in subsequent standards.

Another aspect to keep in mind is the fact that some standards make reference to very general aspects in one dimension, while others make reference to very particular aspects.

As regards variables, we observed similar characteristics in terms of a disparity in what they seek to evaluate, in the number of variables per objects of evaluation and in their level of specificity. Some are very general and others are very specific. We also observed some objects of evaluation associated with one variable and others associated with more than one variable, in some cases, a great number of variables associated with one single object of evaluation. On the other hand, we also observed some cases in which the same variables are associated with different objects of evaluation. Finally, we have found nominal variables subordinate to other different variables of objects of evaluation.

The number of relationships is one more parameter that demonstrates a lack of uniformity and homogeneity in the composition of the standards for the different dimensions.

It is plausible to think that by continuing to provide accreditation to undergraduate medical programmes in Argentina using standards formulated in this way, and based on previous work, that value judgements would be increasingly prototypical, with descriptive discursive evaluations instead of argumentative ones, with binary classifications (dichotomous) and complex syntactic structures, in addition to being insufficient and impertinent when compared to standards formulated and composed of one object of evaluation and one variable associated with each other.

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