

SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

Self-assessment for career accreditation: An exploratory systematic review

Autoevaluación para acreditación de carreras: Una revisión sistemática exploratoria

Driannet Castillo Peña¹  , Yumy Fernández Vélez¹ , Ariagna Martínez Pérez¹ , José A. Martínez Silva² 

¹Universidad San Gregorio, Carrera de Medicina. Portoviejo, Ecuador.

²Universidad de la Tunas, Carrera Educación Primaria. Las Tunas, Cuba.

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Corresponding author: Driannet Castillo Peña 

ABSTRACT

Introduction: the growing concern about actions to improve the quality of health careers and the prominence that self-assessment for accreditation assumes in this sense demand a comprehensive and updated view of this process, but the researchers found the existence of recent systematized studies, which is why this research was carried out with the objective of identifying weaknesses and actions to improve the self-assessment process for accreditation of careers in health sciences as a strategy to promote compliance with quality standards.

Method: for this study, an exploratory systematic review was carried out applying the recommendations of the PRISMA 2020 guide to answer the question: How to contribute to the improvement of the self-assessment process for accreditation of careers in Health Sciences? The search for articles was carried out in Scielo, Scopus and ERIC limiting them to the English language between 2020 and May 2025.

Results: the sample was made up of 11 studies, among the deficiencies found, theoretical and methodological gaps about the process and difficulties in involving the community in it stand out. Among the recommendations we have to increase training for actors and promote the active participation of all those involved.

Conclusions: for the self-evaluation for career accreditation to be successful, knowledge is needed to allow its proper implementation.

Keywords: Self-Evaluation of Careers; Accreditation of Academic Programs; Quality of Higher Education.

RESUMEN

Introducción: la preocupación creciente acerca de acciones para mejorar la calidad en carreras de la salud y el protagonismo que en este sentido asume la autoevaluación para acreditación demandan una visión integral y actualizada sobre este proceso pero los investigadores constataron la existencia de estudios sistematizados recientes por esto se realizó esta investigación que tuvo como objetivo identificar debilidades y acciones de mejora del proceso de autoevaluación para acreditación de carreras favoreciendo el cumplimiento de los estándares de calidad.

Método: para este estudio se llevó a cabo una revisión sistemática exploratoria aplicando las recomendaciones de la guía PRISMA 2020 para dar respuesta a la pregunta: ¿Cómo contribuir a la mejora del proceso de autoevaluación para acreditación de carreras? La búsqueda de artículos se realizó en Scielo, Scopus y ERIC limitándolos al idioma inglés entre el año 2020 y mayo del 2025.

Resultados: la muestra estuvo conformada por 11 estudios, entre las deficiencias encontradas resaltan vacíos teóricos y metodológicos acerca del proceso y dificultades para implicar a la comunidad en el mismo. Entre las recomendaciones tenemos incrementar las capacitaciones para los actores y promover la participación

activa de todos los involucrados.

Conclusiones: para que la autoevaluación para acreditación de carreras sea exitosa se precisa de conocimientos que permitan su implementación adecuada.

Palabras clave: Autoevaluación de Carreras; Acreditación de Programas Académicos; Calidad de la Educación Superior.

INTRODUCTION

Improving the quality of education is a concern for higher education institutions (HEIs), especially those dedicated to medical training, as they believe that this factor promotes the graduation of competent professionals. In this field, the evaluation of programs, degrees, and universities has shown sustained development in recent decades in response to the need to train professionals who are increasingly relevant to social demands.⁽¹⁾ Thus, the processes of evaluating the quality of educational programs are a practice that has been established to strengthen the improvement of education and its substantive processes.

To ensure the credibility of compliance with quality standards before society, the accreditation of institutions and their degree programs has emerged. This is carried out by public or private agencies, according to the regulations of each country, and consists of a self-evaluation and an external evaluation by an authorized agent, based on previously established standards. In this sense, self-assessment is an essential tool for programs to identify their degree of compliance with quality indicators, becoming a key component for quality assurance and accreditation by allowing the identification of strengths and weaknesses in the programs applied.⁽²⁾

In the Americas, degree programs, especially those in health, face the challenge of meeting high-quality standards amid a complex economic and social situation. In this sense, self-assessment can become an ally that supports compliance with these standards and facilitates accreditation. Given the complexity of its implementation, agencies issue guidelines and recommendations for its implementation, but difficulties remain in carrying it out.

In the quest for improvement and understanding, it has been the subject of several studies,^(3,4,5) and others have demonstrated difficulties in its implementation.^(6,7,8)

Institutional self-assessment is a methodological process of self-reflection that enables an evaluation of strengths and weaknesses, allowing for the effective rectification of activities and processes.⁽⁹⁾ After completing a degree program, it is a learning process about performance that allows for the improvement of the fulfillment of the vision and mission. When carried out as part of an accreditation, it must be governed by the criteria established by the entities and offer verifiable and objective information.

In Ecuador, the evaluation and accreditation of institutions and their academic programs are carried out by the Council for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (CACES). They are currently implementing a new model. Therefore, HEIs and their degree programs require effective self-evaluation that can be used to complete the accreditation process and serve as a valuable strategic tool for institutional quality assurance. Considering the limited literature on the subject and the need for a comprehensive and up-to-date view of the program self-evaluation process, this systematic review was conducted to identify weaknesses and recommend actions to improve the self-evaluation process for program accreditation, thereby promoting compliance with quality standards.

METHOD

This study was conducted by applying the recommendations of the PRISMA 2020 guideline and the exploratory systematic review methodology proposed by Arksey et al.⁽¹⁰⁾ from the perspective of Fernández et al.⁽¹¹⁾, following five phases: formulation of the research question, development of inclusion and exclusion criteria, review and selection of studies, data extraction, and analysis of results. The researchers found that there are currently no systematic studies on the subject; hence, the justification for this research, which aims to answer the question: How can we contribute to improving the self-assessment process for degree accreditation? They considered the following inclusion criteria: a. time interval from 2020 to May 2025, b. studies in English and Spanish, c. type of article: original, d. Topic: Self-assessment processes for degree accreditation. Studies conducted at other levels of education, systematic reviews, and those considered irrelevant to the research question were excluded.

The sources of information used were Scielo, Scopus, and ERIC. For the search strategy, the Boolean operators AND, OR, and keywords were applied to identify the topic and its presence in the title, abstract, or keywords, establishing the following formula in Spanish: “autoevaluación” AND “health careers” OR “academic programs in medical sciences” AND “accreditation” and in English: “self-assessment” AND “accreditation” and medicine or health education. To validate this strategy, we checked whether it was capable of identifying five relevant

studies known on the topic, verifying their appearance in relation to the development of the plan.

As an initial result, 108 articles were obtained. Microsoft Excel was used to systematize the data, and variables such as year, country, keywords, and main topic were analyzed using Mendeley, allowing for the elimination of duplicates and verification of compliance with the inclusion criteria. This process resulted in a total of 72. The selection process included identifying those eligible for full-text analysis based on the title and abstract. Three researchers participated independently in this process, and the results were finally compared and discussed. Documents from research unrelated to higher education and those that were not relevant because they focused on other aspects of the process were excluded, resulting in a total of 11 documents for analysis. The flowchart for the selection is shown in figure 1.

RESULTS

In accordance with the inclusion and exclusion criteria outlined in the methodology, the search was conducted in the designated databases. The flow chart for the selection is shown in figure 1. The most significant number of studies eliminated was due to limited access and corresponded to Scopus, with 43 % of those retrieved, followed by the level of education at which it was conducted.

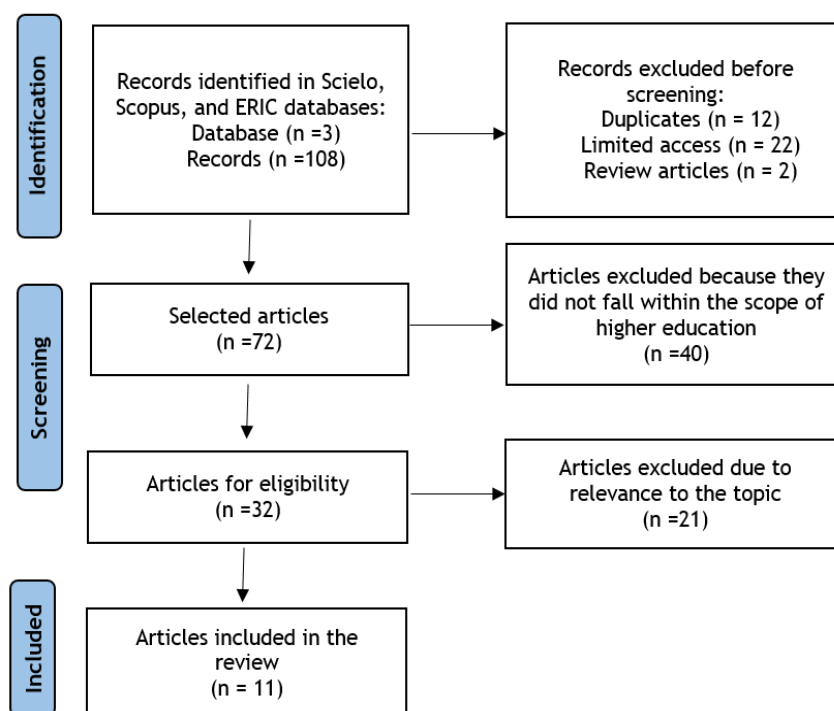


Figure 1. Flowchart for the selection of articles

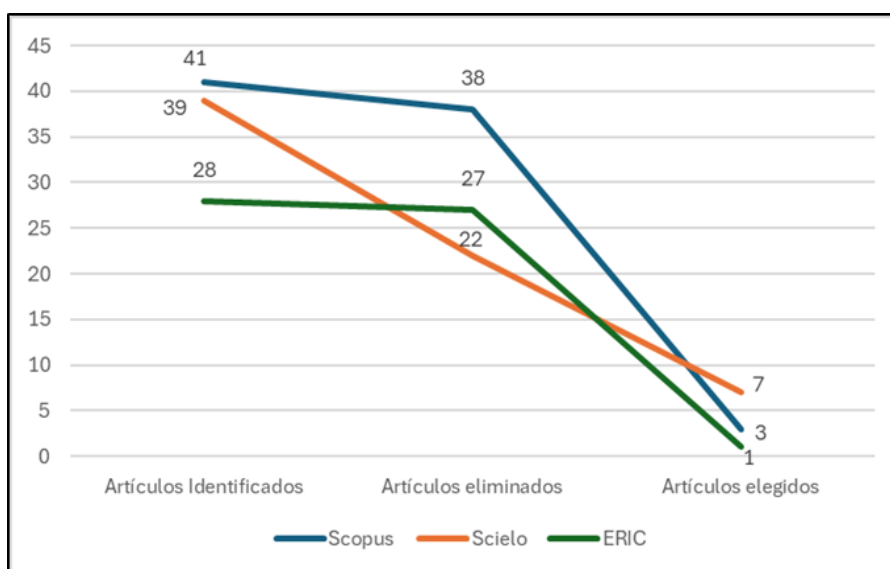


Figure 2. Comparison between articles identified and selected by databases

When comparing the number of articles identified (figure 2), it was found that the database with the most contributions was Scielo. Although Scopus initially had a high number, it had the largest number of articles eliminated due to access or relevance to the research objective. However, this contrasts with the relevance of its articles to the research.

When comparing the results obtained by year, figure 3, it was observed that the years with the highest number of publications were 2021 and 2023. Likewise, no research relevant to this study was found for the year 2020, so they were eliminated in the selection process. The behavior in terms of number per year did not change significantly.

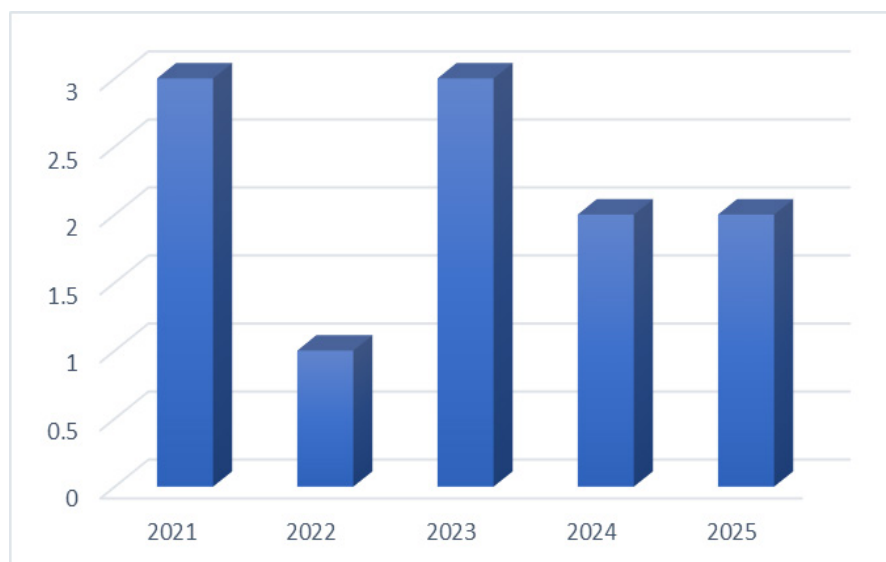


Figure 3. Comparison between articles identified and selected by databases

Of the 11 articles selected as a sample, table 1 highlights that the country with the most publications was Cuba, and four of these were in health-related fields. Research was also found whose content delves into self-assessment but whose title refers only to the accreditation process, hence the importance of combining both in the search strategy.

Year/Country	Author	Title
2025 Mexico	Guzmán et al. ⁽¹²⁾	Methodological proposal for educational improvement in a medical school based on a comparative analysis of external and internal evaluation
2025 Cuba	Illnait et al. ⁽¹³⁾	Medical Microbiology Program at the Pedro Kourí Institute of Tropical Medicine. Self-assessment and accreditation, 2019-2023
2024 Paraguay	Orue et al. ⁽¹⁴⁾	Proposal for innovation in self-assessment and accreditation processes in Paraguay
2024 Colombia	Bonett et al. ⁽¹⁵⁾	Implementation of the self-assessment and self-regulation model for obtaining institutional accreditation: case study of the Universidad de la Costa
2023 Mexico	López et al. ⁽¹⁶⁾	Self-assessment: a defining stage in the accreditation of higher education institutions
2023 Cuba	Fonden et al. ⁽¹⁷⁾	Methodology for quality system management at the Miguel Enríquez Faculty of Medical Sciences
2023 United States	Chen ⁽¹⁸⁾	PA Leaders' Attitudes Regarding Accreditation Self-Assessment Processes: A Phenomenological Analysis
2022 Cuba	Fonden et al. ⁽¹⁹⁾	Operational strategy for the self-assessment process at the Miguel Enríquez Faculty of Medical Sciences in Havana
2021 Cuba	Baños et al. ⁽²⁰⁾	The degree accreditation process
2021 Costa Rica	Hidalgo et al. ⁽¹⁾	Opinions on self-assessment processes for accreditation purposes: The perspective of the Self-Assessment Committees of the School of Education Sciences at the State Distance University, Costa Rica
2021 Cuba	Arias et al. ⁽²¹⁾	Evaluation and accreditation of postgraduate specialties at the University of Medical Sciences of Camagüey

Weaknesses identified in the self-evaluation process for degree accreditation

Lack of objectivity due to personal biases, poor understanding of evaluation criteria, limited self-critical capacity leading to overestimation of achievements and minimization of non-compliance, Standardized instrument that does not always correspond to the reality of the institutional context, poor availability of spaces for exchange, insufficient participation of the university community, evaluation focused on the result and not the process, deficiencies in the collection of information, low quality of the self-evaluation report.^(1,12,16)

Recommendations for improving the self-evaluation process for program accreditation.

Enhance the knowledge of those involved in the process through training or other activities that foster a deeper understanding of the accreditation criteria and the self-evaluation methodology.^(12,14,15,17,19,20,21)

Contextualize the model and methodology proposed by the regulatory bodies as much as possible.^(1,12,14)

Continuous preparation of staff and documentation.⁽²¹⁾

Plan the process properly, assigning clear responsibilities to those involved.^(16,18,19)

Generate reliable and verifiable information. To achieve this, it is necessary to train participants on the correct method for collecting evidence and the sources of information to be considered.

Greater dissemination of the schedule, phases, and importance of this evaluation for quality improvement among the university community.^(1,12,16,21)

Encourage the active participation of students, teachers, and administrative staff, promoting self-critical thinking.^(1,12,13,14,15)

Use surveys to gauge participants' perceptions and opinions.⁽¹³⁾

Provide feedback on the results to the university community, promoting debate and constructive criticism.^(12,13,14,15,20,21)

Monitor and control the process and meta-evaluation using surveys to gauge the perceptions of all staff involved.^(13,18,19,21)

DISCUSSION

The literature reviewed in this study and elsewhere suggests that self-evaluation of degree programs for accreditation faces significant challenges in the region. Self-evaluation is an internal participatory process that seeks to improve the quality of an institution or program. When its objective is to obtain accreditation, it must comply with the criteria established by an accrediting body.⁽²²⁾

This complicates its implementation, as it involves putting into practice a standardized model that does not always align with the reality of the HEI and its programs. Despite the risk of undermining the institution's autonomy, standardizing indicators is crucial⁽²³⁾ to ensure minimum quality conditions in all programs. It should be clarified that this is not sufficient if the goal is long-term quality assurance.⁽²⁴⁾ In this case, an authentic culture of evaluation should be promoted among the university community, where actions are taken to advance and improve toward the paradigm of quality, rather than merely passing an evaluation process. In other words, this evaluation process should be viewed as a means, not an end in itself.^(25,26,27)

It is also a key component that enables programs to improve their processes continuously⁽²⁾ and their accreditation, but this requires in-depth knowledge of the process and certification itself. It is not a process that can be improvised or carried out by personnel with gaps in their theoretical knowledge, as this will become an obstacle and prevent the process from fulfilling its objective. Hence, there is a need for continuous training for all staff, especially those who will form part of the self-assessment committee. Previous studies have found evidence of deficiencies in the final reports and in each stage of the process.^(4,7,28,29,30) This confirms the need to increase knowledge about the process and also to consider that the personnel carrying it out must have the ability to plan and execute it. This can only be achieved through theoretical mastery of the subject. Still, the necessary infrastructure to carry it out also contributes, making a genuine commitment on the part of the required authorities.

It is essential to remember that this is a participatory process, and students must be involved, as their opinions are valuable for its improvement. Self-evaluation is fundamental and critical to the program's success in passing accreditation, as it provides the necessary information to comply with quality standards.^(28,29,30,31,32) Still, its success depends on being carried out with adequate theoretical and methodological mastery and on a genuine commitment on the part of the program's members to execute it.

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of self-assessment for program accreditation is to verify the degree of compliance with established standards objectively and to make informed decisions that will improve it. To this end, it must be carried out with an intensely self-critical eye and a broad mastery of the criteria established for its evaluation. Therefore, it requires knowledge of the accreditation requirements and the methodology for implementing them, as this is the only way to achieve its objective of identifying weaknesses and proposing effective

improvement plans, which necessitates deep critical thinking. Despite the studies carried out, deficiencies in the process persist and are primarily related to the information gathering and report writing phases. Among the most common recommendations for improvement are increasing the level of knowledge on the subject and involving the entire university community in the process.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

Conceptualization: Driannet Castillo Peña, Ariagna Martínez Pérez.

Data curation: Driannet Castillo, Yumy Fernández Vélez, Ariagna Martínez Pérez.

Formal analysis: Driannet Castillo Peña, Yumy Fernández Vélez.

Funding: Driannet Castillo, Ariagna Martínez Pérez.

Research: Driannet Castillo, Yumy Fernández Vélez, Ariagna Martínez Pérez, José A. Martínez Silva.

Methodology: Driannet Castillo Peña, Yumy Fernández Vélez.

Project administration: Driannet Castillo Peña.

Resources: Driannet Castillo Peña, Yumy Fernández Vélez, Ariagna Martínez Pérez.

Software: José Antonio Martínez Silva, Ariagna Martínez Pérez.

Supervision: Driannet Castillo Peña.

Validation: Driannet Castillo Peña.

Visualization: José Antonio Martínez Silva.

Writing - original draft: Driannet Castillo Peña, Yumy Fernández Vélez.

Writing - review and editing: Driannet Castillo Peña, Ariagna Martínez Perez.