Leveraging Accreditation to Move Health Institutions Toward Social Accountability

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Abstract

Accreditation systems for professional education are not often seen as fertile ground for innovation and are often seen as bastions of stability and preservation of the status quo. By contrast, our project foregrounds accreditation as a progressive way to address the social, institutional, and educational issues that the Social Accountability "movement" is responding to. Building on the momentum gained by Social Accountability in the domain of health professional education, this article features initiatives that leverage accreditation to further the aims of Social Accountability. This opportunity crosses local and global axes, and although accreditation processes and norms vary widely from context to context, our work focuses on how it can be used as a positive lever for change in medical schools and other institutions in ways that both promote and align with Social Accountability.

Introduction

Accreditation systems for professional education are not often seen as fertile ground for innovation and are often seen as bastions of stability and preservation of the status quo. By contrast, our project foregrounds accreditation as a progressive way to address the social, institutional, and educational issues that the Social Accountability "movement" is responding to. While Social Accountability has made waves in the domain of health professional education,[1,2] prompting medical schools to forge deeper connections of accountability with the communities and societies they serve,[3] one important way to advance Social Accountability is in and through the process of accreditation. This opportunity crosses local and global axes, and although accreditation processes and norms vary widely from context to context, our work focuses on how it can be used as a positive lever for change in medical schools and other institutions in ways that both promote and align with Social Accountability.

Background on Socially Accountable Medical Schools and Accreditation

Social Accountability – critically understood as a social justice movement within health professional education[4] – attempts to further the aims of health equity by aligning its curriculum, research, and community activities with the health priorities of its local community. The call for medical schools to become socially accountable arose in 1995 when the World Health Organization (WHO) published a report obliging medical schools to lead activities addressing the priority health concerns of the communities they serve and to do so jointly with key partners, namely governments, healthcare organizations, health professionals and the public. In 2010, the report "Global Consensus for Social Accountability of Medical Schools" outlined ten strategic directions to achieve this goal.[5] Then, in 2019, Boelen and colleagues published a key article about the role of accreditation in advancing equity and social accountability.[6]

Accreditation is a process by which institutions and programs voluntarily or by mandate undergo an extensive audit for educational quality. Globally, accreditation systems are numerous and varied and are often developed gradually within their own unique contexts and consisting of distinctive features.[7] As such, growing calls to update health professions education accreditation to ensure that graduates of a high caliber are produced by quality training programs[8],[9] are among critical 21st-century reforms.[10] Some argue that transparency in accreditation policies and practices is needed to allow constituent knowledge and participation, which will improve accreditation processes and "optimize quality assurance for the public."[11] This has led to suggestions that the public reporting of accreditation results in North America (which has been adopted in Australia and the United Kingdom) would enhance public trust, hold medical schools accountable for continuous quality improvement (CQI), and promote collaboration within the broader system of medical education.[12]

While accreditation systems support educational standards,[13] [14] [15] [16] [17] [18] social accountability standards, properly derived and applied, help to address the priority health needs of local communities.[19] [20] [21] [22] [23] [24] Thought leaders in the field argue that educational programs should be measured by their ability and capacity to address and impact society's self-identified healthcare needs.[25] [26] [27] As the only country to have introduced social accountability standards into undergraduate and continuing medical education, Canada is playing a leading role in driving accreditation innovation worldwide.[28] [29] [30] [31] Accreditation standards based on social accountability can bring attention to community needs in a variety of ways through curricula, research, policies, student recruitment, and faculty recruitment. Such standards align the goals of the education and health systems – i.e., improved health and health care – and, in doing so, contribute to positive learning environments and improved clinical learning environment outcomes.[32] However, such standards can only be achieved by fostering and maintaining substantial and deep connections between researchers, policymakers, accreditation bodies, and the public.

Figure 1. Partnership Pentagram Plus (Markham et al., 2021)

The Partnership Pentagram, first described by Charles Boelen,[33] and then adapted by Ray Markham and colleagues as the PP+,[34] identifies groups who are essential for education and health system reform. Equitable engagement with each of these voices is critical to the relational process of creating change. Observing this framework, the principles of coordinated and collective action for change create reciprocal lines of exchange between sectors, disciplines, and communities, all in the interest of an accessible, socially accountable, and equitable approach to accreditation innovation.

Our Innovative Solution

Our innovative solution to the problems that Social Accountability responds to – namely, the lack of accountability and distance between postsecondary campuses and the local communities they serve – is to leverage the collective wisdom of Social Accountability and medical education thought leaders to advance accreditation innovation. We believe that accreditation systems can support medical schools and other health professional programs in achieving greater social accountability and health equity. Below, we outline the evolution of an international think tank working to advance social accountability accreditation standards.

Discussion: Creating Sustainability and Action

In 2021, the Association of Faculties of Medicine in Canada (AFMC) convened three think-tank sessions on Social Accountability and Accreditation with learners, policymakers, faculty, clinicians, and community members from 30 countries. This group of over 100 international participants identified key recommendations and actions, which were consolidated into a report that was shared widely.[35]

Following these think tank sessions, its key recommendations, and future actions were moved forward by the establishment of an international steering committee and three key action groups. The newly formed *International Social Accountability and Accreditation Steering Committee* (ISAASC) serves a critical coordinating function for advancing the collective action of many. The *Steering Committee* consists of the action group co-chairs and additional international representation (i.e., regional, professional, gender), who all work together to guide and support synergy among the *action groups* in their collective work to advance accreditation in support of social accountability. To date, there are four action groups: Standards Setting (tasked with creating frameworks to guide different health accreditation systems as they reform their assessment systems), Capacity Building (dedicated to improving institutions' capacity to navigate challenges when pursuing positive changes towards social accountability), Advocacy (driving the need for change with all partners), and Research (expanding the evidence of social accountability and accreditation).

The Steering Committee works to share emerging and promising accreditation innovations that focus on social accountability. For example, members of the Steering Committee have launched an international fellowship in social accountability[36] and are hosting a free international symposium series on social accountability and accreditation to help continue to build a network of international health education leaders committed to advancing social accountability.[37] The Network Towards Unity for Health (TUFH)[38] and its student ally Student Network Organization (SNO)[39] are undertaking a multiyear strategy to advance the community/educational institution as well as the broader PP+ both internationally and vertically ("from the village to the globe") through shared work and exchanges in a manner that supports the realization of the vision of social accountability inherent in the work of the ISAASC. Each of these initiatives reflects the fact that active culture change takes multiple actions at multiple levels over time in order to be realized, and integrated, interacting initiatives show great promise in advancing social accountability.

Conclusion

Advocating for the importance of accreditation reform, we call on accreditation bodies to include social accountability as a key criterion in their accreditation standards and measures and to consider how social accountability can help them reimagine the paradigms that they use to understand accreditation itself. Advancing beyond a culture of external audit to one of institutional self-assessment and peer review — the essence of professionalism[40] — while reflecting a shared desire to advance social accountability is an innovation of great promise in a very complex undertaking.

Acknowledgments

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