

# Research and Accreditation

John Norcini, Ph.D.

[John.Norcini@gmail.com](mailto:John.Norcini@gmail.com)

- Research and accreditation
  - What we know
  - Framework for a research agenda
    - Outcomes
    - Process
    - Standards
  - Research challenges
  - Strategies going forward

## Overview

## What we know

- Accreditation is experiencing a rapid increase fueled by
  - Globalization
  - Physician mobility
  - Increasing numbers of medical schools
  - ECFMG policy shift
  - WFME Recognition program

## What we know

- Despite its growth, research is scant (Tackett et al., 2019)
  - Only 30 research studies focused on the scholarship of discovery
    - 12 were based only on document reviews and others based on surveys, interviews, or secondary data
- Strongest evidence comes from a few studies treating accreditation as an intervention
  - Relationship with outcomes was inconsistent and confounding factors were uncontrolled

## What we know

- Australian Council for Educational Research, 2020
  - “The empirical evidence base for accreditation practice across all professional education programmes is very limited; the literature is dominated by commentaries, uncritical descriptions of accreditation process, and anecdotal accounts about a programme’s experience with accreditation.”

## What we know

- Lack of research has negative consequences
  - Undermines credibility
    - Research is central to medicine
  - Threatens the misallocation of resources
    - Estimates of costs for 4 schools in Canada were \$400K-1.1M (2017)
  - Reduces accountability
  - Allows inconsistencies across schools
  - Missed opportunities for improvement
  - Limited data for improvement

## What we know

- Research on accreditation will be unlike research in the basic sciences
  - Causal inferences are not possible
  - Difficult to decide what to measure and how to measure it
  - Context is central
- It is essential to generate evidence that guides practice
  - Epidemiology provides a better model than the basic sciences

## Research Agenda

Outcomes

Process

Standards



- Does accreditation do what it is supposed to do?
  - Most challenging, but most important area for research
  - Start with a focus on accreditation as a single intervention
    - Despite limitations it is most compelling area of work
    - Data are accessible
    - Comparable, but not equivalent, over agencies
  - Helpful to generate research questions around stakeholders

## Outcomes Research Agenda

# Stakeholders

- Many stakeholders, some with common interests
  - Students
    - Interested in quality of their education
  - Medical schools
    - Impacted by the standards and the process
  - Government
    - Funder and regulator
  - Patients
    - Rely on the schools to produce competent physicians
  - Others
    - Healthcare system, profession, licensing bodies, international agencies...

# Students

- Some student questions...
  - What are the retention and graduation rates?
  - Are the students satisfied?
  - Are the graduates ready for further training?
  - Do the graduates achieve professional recognition?
    - Registration, licensure, certification
  - Are the graduates ready for clinical practice?
  - Where do the graduates practice?
    - Mobility, underserved communities

# Medical Schools

- Some medical school questions...
  - Has the curriculum changed for the better?
  - Is the school more attractive?
    - Student and faculty qualifications
  - Is there an ongoing program of quality improvement?
  - Are the faculty and students satisfied?
  - How are resources allocated?
  - Is there more innovation and/or research productivity?

# Patients

- Some patient questions...
  - Do patients have better healthcare outcomes?
  - Is the process of care better for patients?
  - Do patients have better access to doctors?
  - Is there a difference in the cost of healthcare?
  - Are patients satisfied?

# Governments

- Some government questions...
  - How many graduates are being produced?
  - What are the impacts on diversity?
  - Are the number, specialization, and distribution of the graduates consistent with community needs?
  - Is there adequate access to care?
  - Are resources being used appropriately?
  - Is the quality of care better?

- Are the accreditation processes effective and efficient?
  - Considerable importance to the medical schools and the agencies given the sizeable resources consumed by the process
  - Questions can be framed around steps in the process
    - Site visit
    - Decision-making
    - Feedback
    - Plus, others such as documentation...

## Process Research Agenda

## Site Visit

- Some questions about the site visit...
  - How effective is the site visit in ensuring compliance?
  - How big should the team be?
  - Does previous experience make a difference?
  - How much training is needed?
  - What data need to be collected?
  - Are there technological alternatives that might create efficiencies?
    - Is an in-person site visit more effective than a virtual visit?



# Decision-making

- Some questions about the decision-making process...
  - What is the best size and mix of characteristics in the decision-making group?
  - Which factors are key in decision-making?
  - How consistent are the decisions?
  - Is the process transparent?
  - Which mechanisms for public accountability are effective?

# Feedback

- Some questions about the feedback process...
  - Which stakeholders should receive feedback?
  - What types of feedback can be provided to the stakeholders?
  - Is the feedback creating change? If yes, in what? How effective is it?

- Research that focuses on the standards themselves...
  - Which stakeholders are involved in their development?
  - How are they revised, how often, does it matter?
  - Are the standards aligned with best educational practice?
  - What is their relationship with outcomes?

## Standards Research Agenda

# Challenges

- Many challenges to doing good research on accreditation
  - Defining success is difficult and it may take years to develop
  - Different standards across accrediting bodies
  - Changes in standards over time
  - Variability among medical schools
  - Different stakeholders may seek contradictory outcomes
  - Policy and laws that influence accreditation may change over time

# Challenges

- Many challenges to doing good research on accreditation
  - Data access
    - Confidentiality, comprehensiveness, comparability
  - Resource limitations including funding
  - Technological limitations regarding collecting, managing, and maintaining large datasets

## Research Strategies

- Analyze the data already available
  - Common data can be aggregated across the medical schools accredited by the same agency
    - Number of graduates, graduation and retention rates, diversity, faculty and student satisfaction...
- Collect additional data from schools that are designed to address questions about accreditation
  - Medical school accreditation costs, selection into postgraduate training, effect of the process on curriculum

## Research Strategies

- Develop collaborations with one or more medical schools around questions of mutual interest
  - Size and composition of the site visit team, in-person or virtual...
- Develop collaborations with one or more health care systems around questions of common interest
  - Study outcomes including cost, effective care, teamwork...

## Research Strategies

- Develop a regional collaboration among accrediting bodies
  - Regional partners have more in common than international partners
  - Offers the possibility of sharing resources and data, with different agencies taking on different questions
- Research should be an essential part of the work of all accrediting and recognizing bodies
  - Critical given the confidential nature of the data
  - Work should focus on outcomes, process, and standards





There is a dearth of research on accreditation in all its aspects



Framework for a research agenda

Outcomes  
Process  
Standards



There are significant challenges to doing research well



But there are also strategies that facilitate research starting with a commitment to do it

## Summary