

ORIGINAL

## International Accreditation by the International Evaluation and Accreditation Council (CEAI) of the Union of Universities of Latin America and the Caribbean (UDUALC) at the Latin American School of Medicine. Analysis of a transformative institutional experience

### Acreditación Internacional por el Consejo de Evaluación y Acreditación Internacional (CEAI) de la Unión de Universidades de América Latina y el Caribe (UDUALC) en la Escuela Latinoamericana de Medicina. Análisis de una experiencia institucional transformadora

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**Cite as:** Salazar Duany Z, Torres Fernández T, Muro Valle Y, Junco Arevalo JV, Auza-Santivañez JC. International Accreditation by the International Evaluation and Accreditation Council (CEAI) of the Union of Universities of Latin America and the Caribbean (UDUALC) at the Latin American School of Medicine. Analysis of a transformative institutional experience. South Health and Policy. 2025; 4:238. <https://doi.org/10.56294/shp2025238>

Submitted: 21-05-2024

Revised: 23-10-2024

Accepted: 15-06-2025

Published: 16-06-2025

Editor: Dr. Telmo Raúl Aveiro-Róbalo 

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#### ABSTRACT

The outcome of the evaluation process for Institutional and Medical School Accreditation in 2024 is the fruit of a broad and inclusive exercise of consultation, preparation, and organization of evidence in accordance with the guidelines established by the International Evaluation and Accreditation Council (CEAI) belonging to the Union of Universities of Latin America and the Caribbean (UDUALC). This process demonstrated the talent, commitment, and rich diversity of the university community, whose capacity, dedication, and enthusiasm proved up to the challenges of these times. The process began in 2022 and involved all medical sciences university campuses in the country. The objective of the work was to highlight the experience gained by all work teams in compiling self-assessment reports for the institution and the school, as well as the impact achieved in driving medical universities throughout the country to achieve this status. ELAM's international accreditation was the result of a strategic decision in response to the challenges its graduates faced regarding professional and employment recognition in their countries of origin. Supported by previous achievements of excellence at the national level, the institution demonstrated a solid foundation that was strengthened with the technical support of the CEAI, allowing for rigorous planning consistent with international standards. The ethics, experience, and respect of the peer reviewers, both virtual and in-person, transformed each moment into an opportunity for mutual learning and growth. This process not only highlights the institution's merits but also paves the way for international recognition of degrees and credits, promoting academic mobility and fostering continuous improvement.

**Keywords:** International Accreditation; Self-Assessment Guides; Medical Science Universities; Programs; Institution.

## RESUMEN

El resultado del proceso de evaluación con fines de Acreditación Institucional y de la Carrera de Medicina en el año 2024 es el fruto de un amplio e incluyente ejercicio de consulta, preparación, organización de evidencias de acuerdo a las guías establecidas por el Consejo de Evaluación y Acreditación Internacional CEAI perteneciente a la Unión de Universidades de América Latina y el Caribe UDULC en el que se puso de manifiesto el talento, el compromiso y la riqueza de la diversidad de la comunidad universitaria, cuya capacidad, compromiso y entusiasmo se mostraron a la altura de los retos de estos tiempos. Proceso iniciado desde el año 2022 que involucro a todos los campus universitarios de ciencias médicas del país, por lo que el objetivo del trabajo estuvo encaminado a evidenciar la experiencia alcanzada por todos los equipos de trabajos en función de conformar los informes de autoevaluación de la institución y la carrera y el impacto alcanzado para impulsar a las Universidades Médicas de todo el país a alcanzar dicha condición. La acreditación internacional de la ELAM fue el resultado de una decisión estratégica frente a los desafíos que enfrentaban sus egresados en cuanto a reconocimiento profesional y laboral en sus países de origen. Sustentada en los logros previos de excelencia a nivel nacional, la institución demostró una base sólida que fue potenciada con el acompañamiento técnico del CEAI, permitiendo una planificación rigurosa y coherente con estándares internacionales. La ética, experiencia y respeto de los pares evaluadores, tanto en espacios virtuales como presenciales, transformaron cada momento en una oportunidad de aprendizaje y crecimiento mutuo. Este proceso no solo visibiliza los méritos de la institución, sino que allana el camino hacia el reconocimiento internacional de títulos y créditos, promoviendo la movilidad académica e impulsando la mejora continua.

**Palabras clave:** Acreditación Internacional; Guías de Autoevaluación; Universidades de Ciencias Médicas; Programas; Institución.

## INTRODUCTION

Due to the importance, usefulness, and necessity of evaluation processes taking into account the Latin American context and the point of view of those who lead universities, the Union of Universities of Latin America and the Caribbean (UDUALC) proposed the creation of an International Evaluation and Accreditation Council (CEAI) to support higher education institutions (HEIs) in our region, offering relevant and objective information to promote their continuous improvement. Evaluation and accreditation are conceived from a perspective of change and improvement of the quality of the substantive functions and educational institutions. This helps promote quality assurance processes and guide HEIs towards quality management.<sup>(1)</sup>

Background to the establishment of a Latin American evaluation and accreditation body. For many Latin American universities, it was necessary to create an international body to assess the quality of higher education institutions or some of their components, with criteria, indicators, and standards agreed upon and contextualized for the region. For this reason, at the IV Assembly of the Andean Region of the UDUALC held on 14 and 15 August 2014 in Lima, Peru, at the Pontifical Catholic University of Peru, it was proposed to have a Latin American and Caribbean meeting on university evaluation and accreditation.

The UDUALC decided to convene the I Meeting of Experts on Evaluation and Accreditation of the UDUALC in Cuenca, Ecuador, to discuss the relevance of an international evaluation body. This meeting laid the foundations for creating the International Evaluation and Accreditation Council (CEAI). Subsequently, UDUALC convened five more meetings. The second meeting was held in Campinas, Brazil; the third in Cordoba (Argentina); the fourth in Leticia (Colombia); the fifth in Mexico City; the sixth in Bogota (Colombia); and the seventh in Lima (Peru).

Once the CEAI Evaluation and Accreditation System has been determined, a pilot test will define its validity, reliability role, and relevance in a Latin American and Caribbean university. With the theoretical-methodological part of evaluation and accreditation resolved, the next step for the CEAI was the constitution of its Board of Directors, its highest governing body, made up of one person appointed by an HEI from each of the six regions, an Executive Director, a member of the Evaluation Commission and the Secretary General of the UDUALC.<sup>(2)</sup>

The regulations of the CEAI state that the director and the six universities from each of the six regions will be appointed in their first composition by the Executive Council of the UDUALC. Subsequent appointments will depend on the consensus of the members of the Executive Board.<sup>(3)</sup>

At the UDUALC Executive Council in Havana, Cuba, on 23 and 24 November 2017, the member universities of the Board of Directors were defined. At the Executive Council Meeting in San José, Costa Rica, on 3 and 4 September 2018, the Executive Director was appointed, and the constitution of the CEAI Board of Directors was formalized by asking the rectors of the selected universities to nominate a representative. Subsequently, on 26 November 2018, the first meeting of the Board of Directors was held.<sup>(4)</sup>

## METHOD

This study is part of a scientific research project aimed at describing and analyzing the international accreditation process from a Latin American perspective. It considers both the institutional background and the methodological frameworks developed by the International Assessment and Accreditation Council (IAAC) of the UDUALC.

**Type of study:** This is a qualitative analytical review with elements of documentary systematization. The methodology articulates a mixed approach, combining collecting and analyzing empirical and institutional information with critically examining academic and normative sources. It privileges a contextualized view of evaluation and accreditation processes adapted to the particularities of Latin America and the Caribbean.

**Sources and selection criteria:** The search for information was conducted through a combined strategy, focusing on academic publications indexed in recognized scientific databases (Scopus, SciELO, RedALyC, among others), as well as institutional documents issued by UDUALC and CEAI between 2014 and 2024. Priority was given to materials addressing quality assurance processes, university governance, and regional experiences in external evaluation. The research is based on the philosophical and operational foundations established by the UDUALC, which conceive assessment and accreditation as tools for continuous improvement and not only as control mechanisms. A structure of analysis based on six key dimensions was used: governance, training, research, networking, internationalization, and infrastructure.

**Techniques and methods applied:** Qualitative methods such as documentary analysis, theoretical synthesis, model comparison, generalization of findings, and conceptual abstraction were applied during the analysis. This approach allowed for an in-depth understanding of the mechanisms implemented by the CEAI and the institutional responses to the challenges of international accreditation.

**Contextualization and validation:** Since the CEAI emerged as a response to a real need for Latin American HEIs, the methodology was contextualized within the historical process of the CEAI's constitution, including the regional meetings, the formation of its Board of Directors, and the pilot application of its evaluation system. This historical dimension allowed for validation of the proposed approach's relevance and the model's potential impact in the region.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Beginning of the International Accreditation Process at the Latin American School of Medicine (ELAM). On June 3, 2021, Dr. Jorge González-Pérez, National Director of Teaching, asked Dr. C. Patricio Yopez from the International Evaluation and Accreditation Council of the UDUALC for advice on how to start the accreditation process. C. Patricio Yopez, belonging to the Council of Evaluation and International Accreditation of the UDUALC, for advice to initiate the process of international accreditation of the ELAM, taking into account that the University is affiliated to this International Network of Pedagogy since 2010, due to the importance that this has, because its graduates are suffering blockades in their countries to require them this condition, which had not yet been achieved. However, it was in plans for the year 2020; he explains that ELAM turned out to be the first University of Medical Sciences to obtain institutional certification of EXCELLENCE in January 2020 by the Cuban National Accreditation Board<sup>(5)</sup>, which is a high recognition (only UH has it). It has already been accredited with EXCELLENCE accreditation<sup>6</sup> since October 2019. The missing step was international recognition. In this sense, with the experience of what was done in 2019 by the International Evaluation and Accreditation Council of the UDUALC to the UH, we consider this to be the path to follow, which is what the JAN of Cuba proposed to us. That is why we requested the steps to start preparing the institution for such international accreditation processes.

On 17 June 2021, MINSAP sent the following information to its Rector: The ELAM made the application for international accreditation to the Executive Secretary of the CEAI, Rosa Elena González Ramírez.

The ELAM must first send the application and the following information:

- The certification that the institution is legally operating and has the due authorization conferred by the competent body according to the regulations of each country.
- A general summary report containing the characterization of the institution: Mission, undergraduate and postgraduate academic programs and specifies those accredited, number of students per educational level, number of professors (dedication and academic titles), geographical distribution, and characterization of the different sites, if any, and any other information that the institution considers necessary to disclose.

The CEAI, through the Executive Directorate, analyses the information and sends the ELAM the Council's opinion on the request for evaluation. If the process proceeds, the second stage begins, in which the ELAM Rector sends to the Executive Secretariat of the CEAI the formal request for the process accompanied by:

- MINSAP resolution endorsing the institutional evaluation for accreditation purposes.
- The appointment of the representative to coordinate the evaluation process with the CEAI

## Executive Secretariat.

The Executive Directorate will submit the documentation to the Board of Directors to authorize the start of the self-evaluation exercise. In November, an exchange is coordinated with Dr. C Norma Barrios Fernández, a member of the CEAI for Cuba, to give the first orientations related to the organization of the accreditation process of the institution and which are the primary documents and work instruments essential to carry out the self-evaluation report and the stages to start the evaluation process for institutional purposes.<sup>(7,8)</sup>

The accreditation evaluation process starts with the HEI's application to the CEAI Executive Secretariat. This stage is divided into two parts: the first is the initial contact, where the HEI shows its interest in the process and informs the CEAI of its main characteristics:

The certification that the institution is operating legally and has the due authorization conferred by the competent body according to the regulations of each country.

A general summary report containing the characterization of the institution: Mission, undergraduate and postgraduate academic programs and specifies those accredited, number of students per educational level, number of professors (dedication and academic titles), geographical distribution and characterization of the different branches, if any, and any other information that the institution considers necessary to make known.

The CEAI, through the Executive Directorate, analyses the information and sends the HEI the Council's opinion on the evaluation request. If the process proceeds, the second stage begins, in which the legal representative of the HEI sends to the Executive Secretariat of the CEAI the formal request for the process, accompanied by:

Resolution of the highest collegiate body of the institution to carry out the institutional evaluation for accreditation purposes. The appointment of the representative who will coordinate the evaluation process with the CEAI Executive Secretariat.

The Executive Directorate will submit the documentation to the Governing Board to authorize the start of the self-evaluation exercise. If requested by the HEI, the CEAI will assign an accompanying advisory team to support the understanding of the model and technical aspects of the self-evaluation, for which the HEI will send the formal request signed by the relevant body to the Executive Directorate by e-mail. The support work will be done online or through a medium that allows for effective remote interaction. The self-evaluation is a participatory exercise of the university community and will cover the institution's results over the last five years. It is the process of studying an HEI, including all its organizational levels and programs, designed and conducted by its actors. It contains the identification of the HEI's main achievements, difficulties, and shortcomings and the main directions for its current and prospective development. The self-evaluation report integrates the results of the self-evaluation processes of the different bodies based on the established Guide for Institutional Self-Evaluation. It should have specific characteristics and structure (see Annex A.I).<sup>(9,10)</sup>

The HEI submits the self-evaluation report to the Executive Secretariat, which reviews it and, if it meets the technical requirements, forwards it to the Evaluation Committee.

The additional documentation to be submitted by the HEI to the Executive Directorate is as follows:

- a. The approval of the institutional or program self-evaluation report by the relevant HEI body.
- b. The explicit commitment of the institution that it will provide the external evaluators with unrestricted access to the information necessary for the external evaluation and assume the costs established in the agreement to be signed with the CEAI.
- c. General information about the institution or program: statutes and regulations of the academic and administrative regime; institutional development plan, if any, institutional policies; and any other information that the applicant institution deems convenient or necessary for the Peer Review Panel to form as complete a picture as possible of the institution or program, as the case may be.

On 17 December 2021, taking into account the epidemiological situation of COVID-19, the Rector and the Secretary General of the CEAI signed the CONTRACT FOR THE PROVISION OF SERVICES signed by the Union of Universities of Latin America and the Caribbean, A. C. (UDUALC), through the Council for International Assessment and Accreditation (CEAI), represented by Dr. Roberto Iván Escalante Semerena and Dr. Roberto Iván Escalante Semerena, through the Council for International Assessment and Accreditation (CEAI). Roberto Iván Escalante Semerena, Secretary General of UDUALC, and Dr. Orlando Gabriel Delgado Selley, Executive Director of CEAI, hereinafter referred to as 'UDUALC-CEAI' and on the other hand, the Latin American School of Medicine, represented by its rector Dr. Yoandra Muro Valle, hereinafter referred to as 'ELAM.' The Vice-Rector for Development, MSc. Dr. Zuzel Salazar Duany was appointed as the representative to coordinate with the Executive Secretariat of the CEAI to carry out the evaluation process for the ELAM.

#### Actions carried out at ELAM to organize the International Accreditation Process

- The Rector's letter of request was sent to the National Director of Medical Teaching to initiate the accreditation process.

- Updating of the Quality Commission of the institution.
- Advisory session to the Academic and Development Vice Rectors by Professor Dr. C Norma Barrios Fernández.
- A request to evaluate the cost of the accreditation process was made to the Executive Secretary Rosa Elena González.
- Working meeting with the experts defined for each of the dimensions to be developed.
- Socialisation of the documentation received by the Quality Commission.
- It was indicated by the Executive Secretary Rosa Elena González through Professor Norma Barrios Fernández to carry out the characterization of the institution for its revision and send for the evaluation of the cost of the accreditation process.
- The report on the characterization of the institution was sent to the Executive Secretary of the CEAI.
- The Executive Director of the CEAI has received the proposal for the quotation of the international evaluation process for the consideration of the decision-makers.
- The final considerations of the institution related to the quotation for the evaluation process are awaited by the CEAI Executive Director.

### Relevant Information for the Organisation of the Characterisation and Self-Assessment Report of Elam for the International Accreditation Process

1. Define the institutions that will be incorporated as campuses of the institution with MINSAP.
  - Data of the Rectors and/or Deans: Name and Surname, work center telephone numbers, and mobile phones.
2. Necessary data to be requested by MINSAP from each of the institutions:
  - Teaching Staff.
  - Teaching Category.
  - Scientific Category: Master, Doctors of Science, Research Category.
  - Number of research projects: National, International, and Institutional.
  - Accredited programs: Specialities, Master's, Doctorates.
  - Professional Development Programmes: Diplomas, Training, Courses.
  - Accreditation of Universities: Degree and Institution.
  - Awards obtained by the institution: Annual Health Award, National CITMA Awards, Academy of Sciences Awards, and Other national and international awards.
  - Scientific production of the teaching staff.
  - Scientific Journals certified in each institution.
  - Total number of students in enrolment of international students in each institution.

### International accreditation process

The CEAI's evaluation process is intended to support improving HEI quality and institutional management's assurance of its quality. In this sense, the procedures contemplate different moments in which the HEI will be accompanied to meet the international requirements.

- First, the application for the evaluation process.
- Second, the preparation of the self-assessment report.
- Third is the analysis of the self-evaluation by the CEAI.
- Fourth, preparing the peer review visit (external evaluation).
- Fifth, the peer review visit.
- Sixth, the preparation and delivery of the evaluation report and the opinion, where the HEI's observations are considered.

Accreditation is valid for six years, and reaccreditation may be requested six months before or after it expires.

In the case of Institutional Accreditation, the dimensions that are worked on in the Institutional Self-Evaluation Report are the following.<sup>(11)</sup>

### DIMENSIONS

- Governance, university management, and infrastructure dimensions are closely linked. Governance will be understood as how the institution organizes, decides, and manages its activities and strategies to fulfill its mission and achieve its goals and objectives. At the same time, University Management will be the systematic actions on which the institution is based to define its future, make informed decisions, and determine the appropriate use of resources. Infrastructure refers to the physical structure and



equipment that supports the institution's functions, processes, and activities.

- The Training dimension refers to the policies, regulations, strategies, and programs that derive from the processes and results of teaching, research, and liaison, which are oriented to the integral training of students and the development of the academic body.
- The Research, Artistic Creation, and Innovation dimension will describe the policies, strategies, and actions for the management, production, and impact of generating and transferring knowledge and artistic creation.
- The Linking dimension includes the policies, strategies, and actions for establishing formal relations with other institutions and public and private sectors to contribute to solving local, regional, national, and international problems.
- The Internationalisation dimension will address the policies, strategies, and actions needed to include internationalization in the institution's substantive functions.

A meeting was held with Dr.C Norma Barrios Fernández, CEAI advisor, on 27 December, where the following aspects for the organization of the Self-evaluation Report were addressed.

Subjects to be dealt with in the meeting:

1. Time was established to collect information for the presentation of evidence according to the criteria of each dimension.
2. Information will be collected in the Institutional Agreements with the country's Medical Universities, which provide an outlet for monitoring students at the different campuses.
3. Information is to be requested from the universities that should form part of the characterization in the self-evaluation report.
4. Organization of the self-evaluation process.
5. Internationalisation Policy.
6. Integrated Institutional Management System.
7. Credit System.

Time was established to collect information for the presentation of evidence according to the criteria of each dimension.

Dr. C Norma informs us that the same time for institutional re-accreditation can be maintained, taking into account the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. All the results achieved in years 20 and 21 should be highlighted, as the institution did not stop the course, and adjustments had to be made to maintain the academic year and finish in the planned time.

The Rectors and Deans should be part of the Central Working Committee of the evaluation process.

Information that should be included in the institutional agreements with the country's medical universities provides an outlet for monitoring students on different campuses.

First of all, the report should clearly state MINSAP's guiding character in the directives established for the training of human resources in the medical sciences, a quality that distinguishes it from the rest of the universities.

Therefore, the agreement should refer to the following aspects:

- Systematic feedback with the universities on the progress and trajectory of the students.
- The frequency with which comprehensive visits are made to the institutions where surveys are applied, exchanges with students, teaching staff, management, etc.
- This is information to be provided to the ELAM HQ General Secretariat regarding the closing of the student's academic courses.
- Establishment of support programs.

#### **Information is to be requested from the universities that should be part of the characterization in the self-assessment report**

The information to be requested from the universities to incorporate it into the characterization to be included in the report and some of the evidence requested by specific dimensions, among which are:

Organization of the Self-evaluation process. Once the institutional self-assessment report has been approved, the following procedure is followed:

1. First Virtual Meeting with all the directors of ELAM Headquarters and the Rectors and Deans of the Medical Universities. The Rector must make a presentation according to the considerations requested by the CEAI.
2. Second Virtual Meeting with the Directors who contribute to the different dimensions of the ELAM Headquarters and Universities.

3. Third Virtual Meeting with the ELAM Headquarters Teaching Staff and a representation of the Universities.
4. Fourth Virtual Meeting with student representatives from ELAM Headquarters and the Universities.
5. Fifth meeting with the administrative part of ELAM Headquarters.

Internationalisation Policy. The internationalization policy of the institution should be built based on the aspects included in the Institutional Development Plan, Strategic Planning, Institutional Organic Regulations, and Internal Operating Manual and should consist of various elements such as: <sup>(12,13,14,15,16)</sup>

- Institutional and international agreements, Letters of Intent.
- National and International Academic Networks.
- Professional development activities: stays, internships, post-graduate courses, training, academic exchanges, etc.
- Scholarship system established by MINCEX and MINSAP.
- Follow-up of the work of the graduates.
- Impact of the Henry Reeve Brigade and the SMI/ELAM.

Integrated Institutional Management System. An expert from the UH was hired to advise on the Integrated Institutional Management System, which will allow students, professors, and managers better access to information and feedback on students' academic results. <sup>(17)</sup>

### **Work schedule for the evaluation process. International accreditation. 2022**

In April, the CEAI proposes to carry out a pilot evaluation of the Medicine Degree Programme based on the validation of the Evaluation Guide designed for the first time in this instance. MINSAP approves it, so the preparation of the Degree Programme's self-evaluation report begins. <sup>(18)</sup>

### **Dimensions**

- CURRICULAR MANAGEMENT has four closely linked elements: the composition and management of the curriculum committee, the qualities of curriculum design, the effectiveness of curriculum management, and the effectiveness of educational management.
- The STAFF dimension refers to faculty and teaching support staff selection and composition, pedagogical and disciplinary improvement, scientific production, and performance evaluation.
- The STUDENTS dimension includes admission, retention, and graduation, participation in curricular management, mastery of modes of action, academic efficiency, and student scientific work.
- In the INFRASTRUCTURE AND GOVERNMENT dimension, teaching-learning means securing laboratories, other teaching facilities, and school registration.
- The dimension RELEVANCE AND IMPACT concerns the program's projection towards the territory, country, and internationally, as well as its visibility, satisfaction, and impact.

The evaluation models used considerably facilitated the successful and quality development of the institutional self-evaluation process and the program evaluation process, which contributed to the diagnosis of the current state of each dimension to identify problems, needs, and deficiencies, as well as strengths; it offers support for continuous improvement and quality assurance in each process of the university, thus contributing to the improvement of the objectives set for constant improvement and quality management. The international evaluation process contributed to promoting the culture of external evaluation in Cuban medical science institutions and fostering a culture of quality towards excellence in the university community, favoring the rapprochement between universities and their internationalization.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

ELAM's international accreditation resulted from a strategic decision in response to the challenges its graduates face regarding professional and employment recognition in their countries of origin. Based on previous achievements of excellence at the national level, the institution demonstrated a solid foundation that was strengthened with the technical support of the CEAI, allowing for rigorous planning consistent with international standards. The process involved significant institutional strengthening, with a participatory self-evaluation structured in key dimensions and articulated with MINSAP and other medical universities in the country. The peer reviewers' ethics, experience, and respect, both in virtual and face-to-face spaces, transformed each moment into an opportunity for learning and mutual growth. Despite the impact of the pandemic, ELAM maintained its unwavering commitment to quality, reaffirming its vocation to train health professionals to serve those most in need. This process makes the institution's merits visible and paves the way for international recognition of degrees and credits, promoting academic mobility and encouraging continuous

improvement.

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## FINANCING

The authors did not receive funding for the implementation of this study.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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