

Central American Geography:

Central America is constituted by seven countries, (Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama) with an extension of 523,525 square kilometers and a population of approximately 36 million people.

CEPUCA:

History:

In the city of San Salvador, on August 16 of 1997, the Salvadoran Association of Engineering and Architecture, one of the members of the Council, got the idea to begin a Central American Confederation. Then, in Guatemala, five of the seven professional institutions founded **CEPUCA**, the first day of December, 1997. (Belize and Panama were not present). The CEPUCA Headquarters changes every year, in 2007 the presidency is in Costa Rica.

The name CEPUCA means Central American Confederation of University Professional Entities, which is formed by the Guatemalan Assembly of Presidents of the Professional Colleges (APCOP), El Salvador Council of Professional Associations (CAPES), Honduras Federation of University Professional Colleges (FECOPRUH), Nicaragua National Confederation of Professionals (CONAPRO), Costa Rican Federation of University Professional Colleges (FECOPROU), Panama Federation of Professional Associations (FEDAP) and Belize that doesn't have a Federation of the majority of professionals, for this reason the entity that is invited is the Dental and Medical Association of Belize, which is the biggest association in that country.

In Central America there are about 300,000 professionals, that is near 1% of the total population, very few with a master degree, and less with a doctorate or PhD. The country with better relationship of professionals/population is Costa Rica.

Enhancing Regional Employability through Quality Assurance:

In the first years of the last century, many of the professionals had to obtain their degrees out of the region (Europe, United States and Mexico), or in some areas like health, the University of San Carlos in Guatemala, was the principal educator. With time, the state universities started superior education programs, and during the last forty years, private universities have increased every day. Now superior education, mainly in business administration, technology information and related careers, is a good business. This proliferation obeys to needs of the employment market. In all Central America taxes are not high, and the governments try to attract capitals and investors, through industrial free zones and fiscal incentives. There are many multinationals working in the region, and with the free commerce treaties with North America, the Dominican Republic and others countries, the employment conditions are changing. They are paying better salaries, but this is also a reason for seeking the best qualified employees, which fulfill the hiring needs of companies.

As labor markets are becoming increasingly regional (and international), how does this change the needs of employees and employers?

Many people know now, that education is necessary for improving life's conditions; they can change from one level to the next, if they improve their skills, capabilities and knowledge. Therefore, every day, high school and university registration increases. The labor market is increasing mainly for people that have obtained a degree or technical diploma. The best monitor for employment is the yellow pages of newspapers. Every day they are filled with advertising, seeking for professionals who fulfill some general skills, like a second or third language, knowing and operating computer programs and the specific capabilities for the position. Here is where the competition starts: the best qualified are getting the jobs. And with time, employers see that they can obtain better candidates to a position, so they change the requirements, and the labor market will be more competitive in the next future.

How can quality of education be recognized – nationally as well as beyond borders?

Now many of the employers seek their workers through employment agencies, and in here, they must pass many tests, interviews and they study their life sheet or curriculum (including their academic history). Other companies have a human resources department, which is in charge of seeking the best candidate to any position. In fact, all employers try to obtain the best qualified candidate. First the quality of education of a candidate is recognized by paper, and thereafter by performance in their field of work. The best qualified professionals could be accepted more easily in other countries, mainly in technical positions, where the requirements are not very difficult, we can say "brain stealing". We can also see in newspapers, ads from other countries seeking professionals to work with international agencies. This indicates that the professionals' employment market is growing. Transborder Professional Mobility is another important point of view. University and Academic Prestige is important too, nationally as well as internationally, we know it depends on the graduates qualification.

How should universities best prepare for regional (and international) labor markets?

In this respect, there are two steps, the internal evaluation of the universities and postgraduate programs through the auto evaluation system. On the other hand, the certification system, through special agencies like CCA, ACAP (Accreditation Agencies for Postgraduate Programs) that can be national, regional or international agencies.

The universities need to prepare their staff of professors and teachers, giving them economic incentives when they reach another kind of degree; time for investigating and publishing their studies, for workshops, seminars and all types of meetings that can help them increase their knowledge and skills.

Bring visiting professors, mainly in new fields of knowledge or for deficient programmes and exchange professors to promote new experiences for both.

Incorporate new education technology when preparing the students, in order for them to have a better preparation when they obtain a job.

All these things help the candidates to obtain good positions on the labor markets.

What role can regional QA in higher education play in order to provide reliable information on the quality and relevance of study programmes?

Quality Assurance in higher education is a necessary method to evaluate, make corrections and propose changes that help the students to reach their aims.

Nowadays we can talk about regional labor markets, being this one very competitive; for this reason qualified programmes will obtain the best results, with their graduates.

How can regional QA in HE support the regionalization of labor markets and the regional mobility of graduates?

Well, QA in HE proposes the standards, and the programmes that reach them will obtain quality certification, facilitating the graduates from this institutions to have regional acceptance, and the mobility through borders will be easier for them, because the programmes fulfill the requirements.

Who should be involved in regional QA to assure that the information provided is reliable (e.g. for employers or professional associations)?

All the institutions that by law have the right to approve permission for professional practice should be involved. In the case of Guatemala are the national university and professional colleges; in El Salvador, through the Ministry of Education. In the regional level is CEPUCA (in Central America).

What is the role of modern trade unions?

Although they should play a defensive role of the beneficial rights of their members, through dialogue and negotiation, in our countries these institutions are very corrupted, by the political parties, therefore they are not good seen by the general population. In the case of professionals this is the same.

What are the chances and opportunities of increased transnational QA?

I think we have good chances and opportunities to increase QA at a regional level, because every day there is more people interested in this issue. For this reason CCA was founded in Costa Rica, ACAII in Panama, and ACAP in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, and they are very interested that professionals get to know the work of these agencies.

What are the obstacles and dangers?

The more important obstacles and dangers are: the first one is financial (the cost is high, with respect to maintenance, administration and the start); second is time, if the lapse to start working is too long, the interest in the theme is lost. The third one is the unawareness and absence of information from the institutions interested in obtaining the certification, and the possibility from the agencies, if they don't cover all the countries.

What is the current situation in Central America?

From the Constitution of 1945, we have had in Guatemala the Professional Collegiate Mandatory Law, this one is mandatory to fulfill the requirements in order to obtain permission for professional practice. Besides, the law was changed in 2001, and now is also mandatory to obtain and fulfill annual continuing education credits to be accredited. The interest now is over the programmes and educational institutions. This law is a safeguard for the Free Trade Commerce Agreement; the professionals, who are out of the Central American region, have to fill the requirements requested by law. Professionals Collegiate Mandatory Law is present in Honduras, Nicaragua (from this year) and Costa Rica. There is a special treatment for mobility of Central American professionals, protected by Agreement Act from 1962, this was promoted by CSUCA.

When ACAP starts the accreditation programmes, they will work like an umbrella, giving the chance to all professionals who will graduate from the accredited institution; they will have the opportunity to obtain the mobility more easily.

Will improved regional QA really lead to increased regional mobility of professionals in the near future? Or are there other obstacles which still will have to be overcome?

I think QA is an important issue, but their impact on regional mobility of professionals is too low now, but we cannot forget that mobility is increasing due to globalization and regional agreements.

One obstacle is that Quality Assurance is not known by the majority of professionals, it is not a general aim for many universities. For them, professional education is a big business, and investment in QA affects their profits. We, talking as professional associations, we believe that QA is a necessary theme in schools, universities and all the other high education institution programmes. If professionals have to compete in the professional market, they must understand that proficiency is a result of QA.