

THE CENTRAL AMERICAN QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM (CSUCA, CCA, ACAAI, ACAP, etc.)



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1. General background

- Central America:
 - 7 countries, population 38.7 millions as a whole (Now Dominican Republic is becoming a member)
- Higher education, some basic data:
 - Number of universities: Belize (1), Costa Rica (54), Nicaragua (49), El Salvador (26), Panama (37), Honduras (13) and Guatemala (11); **a total of 191 universities. 19 are public and 172 private.**
 - There is estimated that there are close to 800,000 students in the whole region, (57%) in public universities and (43%) in private univ.

How did the Central American Quality Assurance System start?

- The need of facilitating the academic and professional mobility within the Central American Region attracted CSUCAs attention to the accreditation of higher education (1995-96).
- Then we learned the other positive expected outcome of Accreditation, namely quality improvement and accountability (1996-1998).

Main stages of Central American Quality Assurance System development

- It has been a complex 10 years process that might be separated in 4 main stages so far:
 - From 1996 to 1998 we had an intense process of awareness building, concept clarification and training, design, consensus building and decision making that ended up with the establishing of SICEVAES.
 - From 1998 to 2001 the focus was in self evaluation and regional external peer evaluation aimed to quality improvement (SICEVAES). This evaluation is still going on to date (15 peer external evaluation teams were appointed by CCR-SICEVAES 4 weeks ago).

Main stages.... (2)

- From 2001 to 2003 regional consensus was built to set the Central American Accreditation System that ended with the establishing of CCA.
- From 2003 to current date The building up and development of the Regional Accreditation System is going on. Accreditation agencies have been established (6/9).

The Central American QA System

- It is now a two layers multinational and multisectorial system.
- It includes the participation of stake holders and universities from 7 countries: Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama.
- It also include the direct participation of public universities, private universities, ministries of education and professional bodies (university graduates) from the whole region.

The Central American QAS (2)

- At different levels of the system it also includes the participation of the National Organisms for Science and Technology, the National Academies of Science and in a much less extend representatives of the bussiness sector.
- It also might extend its geographical scope to include another country: The Dominican Republic, since the main university of that country have become member of CSUCA.

The Central American QAS (3)

- It is a two layer system since in one layer it includes a Central American Accreditation Council (CCA) in charge of setting good practice principles for accreditation and standards for the accreditation organisms which operate in the region.
- A Council in charge of carrying out the metaevaluation of the accreditation agencies and its procedures, and awarding regional recognition or accreditation to the accreditation agencies.
- In the other layer the system includes the accreditation bodies themselves, in charge of accrediting the universities and or their study programs.

The Central American QAS (4)

- In the accreditation of the study program or universities level, there are two main kind of accreditation organisms or agencies:
 - On one hand, the Regional (Central American) level usually specialized accreditation agencies, such as ACAAI (accrediting engineering and architecture programs, 2006), ACESAR (accrediting agriculture, food and natural resources management programs, 2005), ACAP (accrediting postgraduate study programs, PhD, MSc, MA, and professional specialization programs, 2006), AUPRICA (accrediting only private universities at institutional level only, 1990).

The Central American QAS (5)

- On the other hand, the National level usually non specialized accreditation agencies, such as SINAES (in Costa Rica, 1998), CdA (in El Salvador, 1998), CONEAUPA (in Panama, 2006) and more recently CNEA (in Nicaragua, 2007).
- This is a very young Regional Quality Assurance System. The main organism, the CCA was formally established at the end of 2003, and the majority of the accreditation bodies have been established after that.

- See Central American Quality Accreditation System diagramme

EVALUATION AND ACCREDITATION ORGANISMS IN CENTRAL AMERICA

NATIONAL LEVEL

ESTABLISHED: ↓

- SINAES (CR) - 1998
- SUPRICORI (CR) - 2004
- CdA (ES)- Ley de 1995
- CONEAUPA (PA) – 2006
- CNAE (NI) - 2006

UNDER CONSTRUCTION:

- SINAESH (Hond)

REGIONAL LEVEL

↓
ESTABLISHED:

- **CCA – 2003 (2° nivel)**
- **SICAR - CSUCA 1962**
- **SICEVAES – CSUCA 1998**
- ACESAR – 2005
- ACAAI - 2006
- ACAP – 2006
- AUPRICA – 1990

SICEVAES General purpose

- Established by CSUCA in 1998 to promote a new culture of quality, evaluation and accountability among public universities in Central America. Self evaluation and external peer review are used as a mean to foster change and quality improvement in participating universities.
- SICEVAES also has worked to support efforts to establish accreditation bodies in the region.

See SICEVAES DIAGRAM

SICEVAES... (3)

- Since 1997 multiple regional activities of dialogue and training on quality assurance and accreditation have been carried out involving the participation of more than 2000 academic staff members and different sector representatives from the whole region.
- This has all been possible with the support of different international cooperation bodies, mainly from Germany (DAAD, HRK, InWEnt, GTZ, BID, OUI, IICA, Taiwan government, EU, etc.)

Main results of the Central American QA System

- It has contributed to develop a growing culture of quality within the academic community and it has also contributed to the regional integration of higher education in Central America. Some important changes start to be seen within universities too.
- We expect that in the near future we can see more wide spread and deeper quality improvements within universities; and also more transparent higher education systems, with more objective information available to the public on quality of study programs and institutions.

The most important achievement of Central American QAS so far

- To open multisectorial dialogue and joint work at regional level focused in quality improvement, quality evaluation and quality accreditation of higher education in Central America.
- In our region for historical and political reasons (civil wars) public universities, private universities, governments and business sector do not speak each other much. Few years ago, it was unthinkable to have any kind of joint project among these sectors, even at national level. But the building up of this regional university Quality Assurance system has made this possible at regional level. It has been quite useful and healthy for universities, for society and for the regional integration process.

What are the next steps ahead?

- Recently established agencies have to start the evaluation and accreditation process of university study programs.
- A scheme of incentives for evaluation, improvement and accreditation of quality in higher education has to be developed and implemented.
- Older and more consolidated accreditation agencies has to start the process of obtaining their recognition/accreditation by CCA.
- Cooperation agreements has to be signed and implemented between regional and national accreditation agencies.
- Financial sustainability of evaluation and accreditation processes and the whole system has to be openly discussed and assured.

Main lessons learned

- **Mistakes that should be avoided**
 - 1. When initiating a complex and large scale project like this, controversial and sensitive issues have to be postponed and/or handled very carefully, even if they are important for the evaluation and accreditation system. In this case issues such as the need of independence of the accreditation body and the need of participation of private universities, governments and other stake holders were almost the cause of aborting the whole process at the first stages within CSUCA itself.

Main lessons learned (2)

- 2. Do not initiate to work in the most controversial and difficult political aspects of the project without having before reached a good level of development of the process, important and visible achievements of the system and the commitment and involvement of high authorities with leadership and clear understanding of the issues, potential benefits, challenges and difficulties of the steps ahead.

Main lessons learned (3)

- 1. Flexibility, creativity and perseverance are highly needed when conducting a project aimed to establish a multisectorial and multinational system of evaluation and accreditation of higher education in a region where universities enjoy a strong and wide autonomy. The system has been successfully established but it is quite different to the one envisaged at the beginning and it was established following different paths of those envisaged when we started this project.
- 2. Do not try to do everything since the beginning. It is necessary to start with clear steps and small but visible achievements, even if not everything is completely ready and perfect. People get tired if preparations and talking seem to last too long.

Main lessons learned (4)

- 3. Just in time dialogue and training of the key players of the process and the system played a crucial role for the success of the whole project. It is very important that the key players have a shared vision, a common language and comparable knowledge on different aspects of the process. Needs of training are different at different levels of the system and at different stages of the process, therefore a just in time approach for organizing training and dialogue activities is highly recommended.
- 4. At each participant institution level leadership and/or political support were of capital importance. In those institutions where capable, respected and highly committed persons with clear support from their Rectors were in charge of the process, or where the Rectors themselves got involved and committed to the project, the process progressed quicker, wider and deeper than in the rest of institutions.

Main lessons learned (5)

- 5. When daily involved in the details, activities, conflicts and different technical and political aspects of the process, it is very important not to forget the final aims of the whole project.
 - It is to say, to obtain concrete significant changes and improvements in the relevance and quality of the study programs and universities, to make available to the public reliable information on their quality, and to facilitate regional and beyond-region academic and professional mobility.