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► Vocational orientation in Costa Rica: strategies and actions towards the educational challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic

One factor in the quality of the Costa Rican educational system is the National Guidance Service which focuses its work on enhancing the integral development of the student population from the educational, vocational, and personal-social components. In 2020 and 2021, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, challenges have arisen for the development of educational processes and the scholastic link, which has led to the need to strengthen strategies and actions related to vocational guidance, with lines of work that allow continuity through blended learning and that accompany students and their families in their educational tasks through inputs that respond to their respective educational scenarios.

Vocational guidance, as a scientific discipline within the educational field, is a factor in the quality of education in Costa Rica guaranteed by the Fundamental Law of Education since 1957.

This discipline has an impact on the permanence and success of the students in school by fulfilling two fundamental purposes in the Costa Rican educational system:

- a. The first purpose is to serve as a process inherent in the curriculum that promotes the full development of the personality and uniqueness of each student emphasizing the formation of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values from their own potential to face the challenges of life in educational, vocational, and socio-emotional terms.
- b. The second purpose is to become a specialized support service that encourages the student population to make decisions in situations at school, in their family, social, and work environments with a sense of responsibility, productivity, and self-realization at a personal and social level. It also includes other important processes such as vocational and psychosocial counselling for school personnel and families, so that they, in turn, contribute to the educational process.

Vocational guidance in the Costa Rican educational system aims to study the enhancement of the integral development of the student population through processes that contribute to self-knowledge, knowledge of the environment, and decision-making involving personal-social commitment in regard to life planning, self-realization of the person, and the common welfare. It is essentially based on continuous intervention through the principles of prevention, development, and social intervention from the framework of the educational process which requires advising the staff of the educational centre regarding comprehensive education as part of their training role, as well as fathers, mothers, or persons in charge of their protective and formative work (MEP 2017, p. 16).

Guidance professionals carry out their work from educational, vocational, and personal-social components. Specifically, in the vocational component, vocational guidance must offer conditions that favour personal and vocational growth and development, so that people are able to face different situations and resolve conflicts that arise in their daily lives. To achieve this, it is important to mediate the construction of self-knowledge, autonomy, self-esteem, understanding of the environment, critical judgment, and the construction of a scale of values that guides behaviour towards personal improvement with an ethical sense (PEREIRA 2012, p. 148).

Based on the studies above and within the framework of the COVID-19 pandemic, challenges have been identified for the vocational support of the student population linked to the need to respond to the diversity of contexts and educational scenarios that exist in Costa Rica (differences in connectivity and access to technological devices for virtual learning) where professional support is not only provided to a student in the classroom, virtually, or at a distance but also involves the family, teaching staff, inter-institutional alliances, public, and private partners, among others.

In this analysis and construction of new paths, the question arises: how to accompany students in self-knowledge, knowledge of the environment, and decision-making involving personal and social commitment in the face of a global situation such as the COVID-19 pandemic? This has led to strengthening synergies with various educational and community actors to expand the forms of educational support available to students and their families.

The following are some of the ways used to strengthen the educational link with the student through vocational guidance based on three means of intervention (group, individual, and counselling):

- Vocational information portal <https://orienta2.mep.go.cr>
- Virtual vocational meeting <https://mep.go.cr/noticias/encuentro-vocacional-virtual-mep-atraera-mas-50-mil-estudiantes>
- Television programmes on national channels, such as:
 - Vocational decisions that revolutionize the world! Link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eWWAsjmZaM4_

- ▶ The superstar helping to develop careers. Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iTk9p8IS0BY>
- ▶ Virtual self-training courses for employees of the Ministry of Public Education: “Digital transformations, technological change and the Costa Rican labor market”; “Education in the framework of science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics: development of skills and abilities; among others
- ▶ Educational videos: Orienta2, STEAM, Vocational Guidance, among others. Link: <https://www.mep.go.cr/proyectos-programas/orientacion-vocacional>
- ▶ Interactive vocational document according to developmental stages
- ▶ Text for families: Educational centres and families teaching together for life (MEP 2020). Link: <https://www.mep.go.cr/sites/default/files/centros-educativos-familias-educando-juntos-vida.pdf>
- ▶ Virtual events and professional presentations: “Transition and linking processes in the Costa Rican educational system: contributions from vocational guidance today”; “STEAM tools to promote vocational development and self-efficacy with gender equity”; “Integrating vocational guidance and STEAM through gamification”; “Mainstreaming the gender approach in the processes of vocational guidance and STEAM strategy”, among others
- ▶ Use of social networks for STEAM talks targeting students #STEAMVOCACIONAL. Link: <https://www.facebook.com/158026007624116/posts/3015355795224442/?d=n>
- ▶ National Guidance Week. Link: <https://www.mep.go.cr/noticias/mep-celebra-su-xl-semana-nacional-orientacion>

Moreover, the STEAM Education Strategy¹ has been continued. It consists of promoting the development of 21st-century skills and competences in students in educational centres, while applying gender perspective so that they can explore and value STEAM areas in their vocational projects. This strategy is supported by Costa Rica’s National Development and Public Investment Plan, as well as by public policies that support it and strengthen public-private partnerships.

From the lines of work established in the STEAM Education Strategy, in accordance with the vocational guidance processes carried out by guidance professionals in primary and secondary schools, and based on the technical support of the regional and national guidance advisors, instruments were designed to monitor the vocational self-efficacy of students, which is widely developed by authors such as MATA (2018). In addition to the professional support of guidance professionals, synergies are sought with the teaching staff to assist the students starting from the early years, and educational spaces that allow exploration, inquiry, and

1 STEAM = Areas of knowledge, such as Sciences, Technology, Engineering, Arts, Mathematics.

development of skills in adherence to the current Educational Policy and Curricular Policy dealing with the development of skills and competences are being established.

Within this framework and working together with families and the community to meet contextual challenges, actions are strengthened to reduce the gender gap in areas of knowledge such as science, technology, engineering, art, and mathematics. For example, it has created an inter-institutional collaboration aiming at promoting affirmative actions to inspire vocations in STEAM areas among female students. One of these responses was the construction of the website ChicaSTEAM <https://orienta2.mep.go.cr/chicasteam/> that contains information as well as synchronous and asynchronous activities that help to support students and their families.

Given the different educational scenarios, the strategies and responses developed from vocational guidance have been adapted to the context with the focus on digital and/or printed inputs. These strategies stem from the synergy with families, local and national entities and strive to strengthen educational links and enhance the comprehensive development of the student population, including their vocational development.

References

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