

State of Affairs of Higher Education in Costa Rica

Sandra Palacios Palacios, Yalile Jiménez Olivares

(Universidad Nacional, Costa Rica)

Abstract: Higher education in Costa Rica is composed of two main subsystems: parauniversity and university. Para university higher education focuses on short term careers of only two or three years, while university higher education takes up to four or more years. The latter subsystem holds most of the population seeking a graduate degree. According to CONESUP (Consejo Nacional Nacional de Educacion Superior Privada), which regulates private higher education, there are fifty private universities in Costa Rica. On the other hand, there are only five state universities in CONARE (Consejo Nacional de Rectores), entity that regulates public universities. Considering these case scenarios, this investigation analyzes Costa Rican public and private education in terms of the number of students enrolled, academic program offerings, the number of degrees awarded, and accredited programs.

Key words: state of affairs of higher education, higher education, public and private higher education in Costa Rica, college education in Costa Rica

1. Introduction

Higher education in Costa Rica is composed of two main subsystems: parauniversity and university. These two types of education can be either private or state (public) institutions. Parauniversity higher education focuses on short term careers of only two or three years, while university higher education takes up to four or more years. The latter subsystem holds most of the population seeking a graduate degree. The first university of Costa Rica was created in 1940. Then, four more state universities were founded. It was until 1976 that private education came into view. By that time, state higher education held 85% of the students and private only 15% of them. Nevertheless, at the present time the state of affairs for higher education show significant variations. Estado de la Educación (2011) reports that there are fifty private universities and five state universities (p. 192). Considering these case scenarios, this investigation analyzes Costa Rican public and private higher education in terms of the number of students enrolled, academic program offerings, the number of degrees awarded, and accredited programs.

2. Costa Rica's Higher Education Background

Institutions of higher education in Costa Rica are categorized as public and private universities. Public or state universities are supported by governmental funds. The Costa Rican's Political Constitution (2009), article 84

Sandra Palacios Palacios, Master of Arts in Linguistics and Applied Linguistics, Universidad Nacional de Costa Rica; research areas: education, linguistics, second language learning, TESOL. E-mail: samypalaces@yahoo.com.

Yalile Jimenez Olivares, Master of Arts in Language and Culture and Business Administration, Universidad Nacional de Costa Rica; research areas: education, linguistics, second language learning, TESOL. E-mail: yalilej@gmail.com.

states that public universities have administrative, organizational and governmental autonomy. Even though they are independent public entities, universities are part of the public sector regarding budget and all the regulations that come from Public Administration. Consejo Nacional de Rectores (CONARE) is the entity in charge of coordinating the public universities and government's affairs. Each public university is intended to cover specific areas of knowledge. Therefore, they offer degree programs according to their mission and vision. Besides, the university grounds of the five state universities are strategically distributed along the Costa Rican territory to reach all types of populations and regions. On the other hand, private universities are supported by private investment and the income earned by tuition and fees. Consejo Nacional de Enseñanza Superior Privada (CONESUP) is the entity in charge of regulating them. Private universities are legally structured as corporations or non-profit associations. Castro (2010) points out "The difference between associations and foundations in Costa Rica is the degree to which oversight is provided by the government; foundations are supervised by the Comptroller General of the Republic, whereas associations are not" (p. 54).

Higher education in Costa Rica has its origins in 1940 with the foundation of Universidad de Costa Rica (UCR). Quesada (1999) states that until 1971, this was the only means of instruction in terms of higher education (p. 293). In the present, UCR has expanded in terms of infrastructure, academic offerings, programs, investigation and extension. Thus, it is considered the most prestigious university in Costa Rica. It has ten campuses, distributed along the country and the main campus is located in the capital; San Jose. Both, undergraduate and graduate programs at UCR focus on six major areas: arts and literature, basic sciences, social sciences, fresh food sciences, health and engineering (UCR, 2012).

Three decades later, four more state universities came into view. However, as they appeared they came to satisfy the population needs in different areas of knowledge. In 1971 Instituto Tecnológico de Costa Rica (TEC) was founded. This university was created to offer undergraduate and graduate programs focused on science and technology (TEC, 2012). Currently, it has four campuses; the main campus is located in Cartago and the others in San Jose and Alajuela. Universidad Nacional de Costa Rica (UNA) is the third independent public university. It was created in 1973. Its university city is located in the province of Heredia. At the present time, it has six campuses which are distributed along the Northern and Southern regions of Costa Rica. The academic program offering emphasizes the areas of exact and natural sciences, earth and marine sciences, social sciences, health sciences, education, philosophy, arts and literature (UNA, 2012). Next, in 1977 distant learning emerged in Costa Rica; thus, Universidad Estatal a Distancia (UNED) was founded. UNED is the state university with more campuses since its means of instruction focuses on public distance education. It has forty-four campuses all around the country in both urban and rural areas. The undergraduate and graduate programs of this university are focused on culture, science, art, literature and human rights (UNED, 2012). Finally, the fifth and newest public university was founded in 2008; Universidad Técnica Nacional (UTN). Its programs came to emphasize scientific, technical and technological areas of knowledge (UTN, 2012). This university has five campuses. The main campus is located in Alajuela and the rest in the Western region of Costa Rica.

Private higher education has its origins in Costa Rica near late 70's. Universidad Autónoma de Centro America (UACA) was the first private university of Costa Rica, founded in 1976. Then, in the coming decades there was a rapid increase of private universities. Currently, there are fifty private universities offering different types of undergraduate and graduate programs (Estado de la Nación, 2011, p. 182). Private universities differ from public in terms of the regulations and categories. Castro (2010) classifies them according to "their size... the national or international orientation of the institution; the disciplinary nature of their academic offering; the type

of special focus institution... and the predominating educational level of their academic offering” (p. 48). Furthermore, she lists six categories for private universities: Private Large Comprehensive Universities, Private Medium Comprehensive Universities, Private Small Comprehensive Universities, Private Special-Focus Denominational Universities, Private Special-Focus National Undergraduate Universities and Private Special-Focus International Graduate Universities. Since, these institutions are not regulated by the Public Administration, there are not accurate records as to the exact number of entities, campuses, number of enrolled students, and degrees awarded. However, Unidad de Rectores Universidades Privadas Costa Rica (UNIRE) reported an estimate of 87.765 enrolled students, 541 careers and 78 campuses (Estado de la Educación, 2011, p. 187)

3. State of Affairs of Higher Education in Costa Rica

The first edition of Estado de la Educación (2005) reveals that in 1985, 50.000 students enrolled in state universities and only 8.360 in private institutions. In the last thirty years the figures have changed, the former holds roughly 76.000 and the later 87.000 students (p. 100). Table 1 shows that in the last three decades the population in private universities increased ten times regarding early 80's. However, the most recent figures reveal that despite the fact there are only five state universities and fifty private colleges, both sectors hold similar amounts of enrolled students. Additionally, note that only twenty-six out of the fifty private universities reported the current enrollment (*).

Table 1 Estimated Enrollment in Public and Private Higher Education in Costa Rica, 1985, 2004, 2010

University	1985	2004	2010
Public (state)	50.083	75.974	88.350
Private	8.360	86.951	87.765*
Total	58.443	162.925	176.115*

Source: OPES-CONARE: data provided by MEP, INEC, and public universities.

*Only 26 out of 50 universities in CONESUP provided the information to the 3rd report of Estado de la Educación.

Furthermore, in terms of academic offerings, by 2004 state universities offered an average of 531 programs, while private 770 programs. Table 2 discloses that the two sectors offer a similar number of programs; even though, private universities exceed the number of public universities in ten times. By 2010, the academic offering in public colleges overpasses private, 604 the former and 534 the latter. The reason for this increase could be based on the creation of the fifth state university, whom offered 35 programs by the second year of its creation.

Table 2 Academic Offerings in Public and Private Universities in Costa Rica 2004, 2010

University	2004	2010
Public	531	604
Private	770	535
Total	1301	1139

Source: CONARE; Academic Division, and CONESUP. In the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Edition of Estado de la Educación.

Another remarkable fact is the number of degrees awarded by each type of educational system. In 1990, state universities issued 5.629 diplomas and private 1.625. Meanwhile, by the year 2004, state colleges doubled the amount of diplomas given, while private universities multiplied ten times their original amount. It is important to remark that state universities graduate most of their students in Education, while private in Social Sciences. Furthermore, they both graduate a similar amount of students in engineering, arts and literature, and other sciences.

Table 3 displays the increase of degrees awarded by the universities, being the private sector the most noteworthy. The most recent report by Estado de la Educación indicates that by 2009 nearly 68% of the degrees are awarded by private institutions.

Table 3 Estimated Degrees Awarded by University Higher Education in Costa Rica: 1985, 2004, 2009

University	1990	2004	2009
Public (state)	7.254	10.374	10.878
Private	1.635	16.098	22.918
Total	8.889	26.472	33.796

Source: OPES-CONARE, UNIRE, CONARE. In the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Edition of Estado de la Educación.

By analyzing the previous charts, it can be seen that at the present time the number of students enrolled and the academic offerings is similar; however, the amount of degrees awarded by private institutions doubles those from public colleges. Thus, there is a visible gap between public and private education. As a result, in 1999, Sistema Nacional de Acreditación (SINAES) was created in order to ‘standardize’ higher public education. Thus, SINAES is the official institution in charge of regulating and accrediting the quality of careers and programs in Costa Rican higher education. On the other hand, private universities created, in 2004, Sistema de Acreditación de la Enseñanza Superior Universitaria Privada de Costa Rica (SURPICORI). The standards and procedures they use are still unknown (Estado de la Educación, 2005, p. 102).

Accreditation seems to be the only means by which institutions of higher education assure students and the public that a college or university meets quality standards. It also gives the institution an opportunity to conduct a critical self-assessment driven by six key criteria: faculty and staff, syllabus, students, infrastructure and resources, administration, planning and institutional effectiveness.

The creation of national and regional accreditation entities, the definition of standards and quality criteria, self-assessment processes and accreditation are some of the tools used to strengthen higher education (Consejo Nacional de Competitividad, 2007, p. 8). These are the principles influencing the policies regarding program offerings in Costa Rican universities. Private and public universities look for the recognition of accredited programs. Table 4 presents the most recent information on the number of accredited programs in public and private universities in Costa Rica.

Table 4 Accredited Programs in Public and Private Universities, 2012

University Acronym	Accredited Programs		University Acronym	Accredited Programs
Public Universities			Private Universities	
UCR	20		U LATINA	4
TEC	10		ULACIT	4
UNA	11		U Véritas	3
UNED	5		U Católica	3
			UCIMED	2
			UNIBE	1
			EARTH	1
Total	46		Total	18

Source: SINAES (Sistema Nacional de Acreditación de la Educación Superior)

To sum up, Table 4 shows that forty-six programs from public universities are accredited and only eighteen in the private sector. Thus, when analyzing higher education, aspects such as the number of enrolled students, academic offering, number of degrees awarded, and most importantly the number of programs accredited must be the main concern.

4. Conclusion

This remarkable increase of private universities, the amount of programs, the number of graduate students, and amount of diplomas awarded has changed the state of affairs of Costa Rican higher education. As a result, new entities have been created in order to ‘standardize’ and regulate the quality of higher education. As the statistics above reveal most attention should be given to quality rather than quantity. As it was said before “accreditation seems to be the only means by which institutions of higher education assure students and the public that a college or university meets quality standards”. To conclude, it is important to strengthen the role of higher education as an agent to integrate all the sectors of the community and provide the population superior scenarios of welfare, equity and sustainability.

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