

# Costa Rica

## Demographics for Costa Rica

Population:	4,016,173 (July 2005 est.)
GDP (by PPP method):	US\$37.97 billion
Currency (inc code):	Costa Rican Colon (CRC)
Language(s):	Spanish (official), English
Internet country code:	.cr

## Primary and secondary education

Costa Rica is one of Latin America's leaders in terms of the percentage of the population that actually has access to formal education. The average years of schooling for the population stood at 7.3 years at the time of the last census, in 2002. Individuals can enter pre-school at five years of age; move to elementary school at 6.5 years of age, where they will spend six years; then move to the intermediate cycle from 7th through 9th; and finally complete high school by 11th grade. The percentage of children of school age actually completing each cycle is, 90 percent for elementary, 72 percent for intermediate and 64 percent for high school. The current government has stated a priority objective to advance the number of students going on to complete high school to 80 percent.

The real issues with basic education in Costa Rica are more related to quality than to effective attendance, as many of the elementary schools, and particularly those in rural areas, are one room schools in which, at different times of the day, three or four groups of students in different grades share the facilities. The gap between these schools and the sophisticated private schools available in urban areas for those who can afford them, is very large in terms of effective learning, languages, technology, science, and mathematics.

One positive aspect of the Costa Rican system is that it has introduced English as a second language and computer education in approximately 75

percent (officially reported by government) of the public elementary schools and in 100 percent of the high schools (7th-11th), although effective connectivity and training of teachers is sketchy at best.

### **Higher education**

The key development for the higher education sector in Costa Rica over the last 20 years has been proliferation. Historically Costa Rica had four public universities until the creation of a private university in the mid 1970s. Of the four original public universities, one was created in the early 1940s while the other three were founded in the early 1970s and include an institute of technology and a distance university that before the age of internet meant that you studied on your own with tutors available by phone and in special Saturday sessions which operated in several high schools throughout the country. To this day, the most prestigious university in the country is the University of Costa Rica, which offers a very complete range of faculties and courses, including management at undergraduate and graduate levels.

After the first private university was founded others started to appear, most of them very small initially, but that have grown to become, in some cases, universities with student bodies of close to 20,000 active students. Most of the private universities offer business administration as one of their initial courses. The total number of universities and institutions offering degrees recognized by the National Rectors Council today is 50, including the four public universities, five international universities with a permanent presence in the country, and 41 private universities of varying size, focus, and quality.

The key trends in university education in the last ten years has been an increase in quality by the most successful private universities following one of two paths: increasing professionalization of faculty and staff and increased subject focus. Using the first of these two strategies, the most successful private universities benchmarked the world, entering into faculty and student exchange programs with foreign universities, mostly in the USA, and investing heavily in infrastructure. It is now common to see these universities offering excellent facilities in terms of classrooms, technology and laboratories and offering the most complex degrees in alliance with foreign universities or local facilities in the areas of interest. It is possible today to find professional courses such as medicine or dentistry delivered in partnership with local private hospitals and clinics. Following the second strategy, it is now possible to find highly focused universities specializing in topics as diverse as medicine, design, ethics and social development, to mention just a few, that achieve interesting levels of performance in their fields of concentration. It should be mentioned that Costa Rica is an international education centre receiving international students through myriad exchanges and also full-time students from neighbouring countries such as Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Colombia.

These trends are giving rise to some political concerns, however, and Congress has appointed a commission to revise the accreditation system governing higher education. In the meantime, a group of private universities have created their own accreditation body and system to supplant the National Rectors Council as the only accrediting body in the nation.

### **Management education**

In the case of Costa Rica there are three very significant trends in management education: the rapid expansion of business education; the increasing quality of business education; and the internationalization of business education. The industry can be broken up into four distinct segments: the international schools; the public universities; the private universities; and the professional training programs.

The first trend is, in a sense, part of the rapid growth of the higher education sector described above, with the particularity that 90 percent of the universities in the country offer business majors or specialty management and entrepreneurship programs, the exceptions being the public universities and the most deeply focused of the private universities. The reason for this is two-fold: on the one hand there seems to be enough demand to sustain growth in the sector; and on the other, the establishment of business programs is seen as low investment and easy to fill in terms of human resources for teaching. The result is a variable quality of programs offered, with the lower end operating in very poor facilities, with inexperienced, non-professional faculty, and the upper end offering state-of-the-art facilities and international accreditations by AACSB, EFMD, and SACS, in addition to local recognition. With the exception of INCAE, which boasts a highly qualified full-time PhD faculty and is a leading research and publication institution at Latin American level (currently ranked as the number one school of business in Latin America), these management departments do little or no business research, with the exception of the dissertations that many of them require from students.

It is not uncommon to see some of the better programs establishing alliances and exchange programs for faculty and students with well known international universities as a means of improving their quality and increasing the number of professional professors in their programs.

Internationalization is taking place at three levels: because of the high demand, international schools are recruiting on an annual basis in Costa Rica, including some MBA recruitment tours; the number of international alliances taking place is huge; and international degree and non-degree programs are coming to the Costa Rican market in large numbers, probably taking advantage of the fact that Costa Ricans, and Central Americans generally, value the impact of management education very highly.

The four resulting active segments in the Costa Rican market are: internationally accredited MBAs recruiting students, particularly for graduate

degrees; international programs of Spanish, Chilean, Argentinean, Mexican and US origin offering professional training programs in the country; local universities of varying quality offering undergraduate and graduate degrees in business and entrepreneurship; and a growing segment of technical courses offered both by these universities and by independent programs in topics such as international trade and corporate social responsibility, where there is a high demand.

Overall, the Costa Rican market is very well served in terms of management education, offering a diversity of quality and cost; having excellent access to international programs; a growing number of specializations (call center management, agribusiness management, sustainability management, export management, etc.); and becoming more and more of an international training center.

The main issues to be solved in the Costa Rican management education sector are: developing an effective accreditation process to increase and sustain the trend of improving quality; improving quality of faculty (only INCAE offers a full-time, research oriented, professional faculty body); and growth of its positioning as an international center for management education as, with a population of only 4.4 million, the industry is probably overloaded right now and will have to reduce to a more sustainable scale in the near future, unless internationalization of the student body is effectively achieved and for this a credible international accreditation process is required.

In terms of knowledge creation, case development, and/or applied research, the sector is still trailing a considerable way behind other fields such as biology, biotechnology, and economics, where leading research is carried out in Costa Rica.

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