

Executive summary

Costa Rica's education system is at a turning point. Education has traditionally been an engine for the country's development and has been crucial in building one of the most stable democracies, most skilled-based labour markets, and highest levels of well-being in Latin America. The stagnation of education outcomes in the last decade, together with widening inequality and slow growth, risks stalling the country's further development. Improving access to quality education in Costa Rica has become more important than ever.

Access to education has increased in Costa Rica at a faster pace than in other Latin American and OECD countries, but the country has not been able to raise the quality of learning outcomes at the same time. Costa Rica's 15-year-olds performed about two years below their peers in OECD countries in PISA 2015. With weak foundations, students struggle to make progress through the education system. Inequities have also remained large. While disadvantaged students have greater access to education, the remaining gaps in the early years and poor quality of teaching and learning environments hamper their chances to escape poverty. Virtually all the wealthiest students make it to university compared to less than one in five of the poorest students.

Providing a strong start for learning and life

Costa Rica has increasingly recognised the importance of early childhood education and care (ECEC) for a range of educational, economic and social goals. While this has led to determined steps to improve access and quality of ECEC, the sector is still considerably underdeveloped. Only 63% of children attend two years of pre-school and less than 10% of under 4-year-olds benefit from care services. Moreover, limited attention is given to building critical cognitive, emotional and social skills that children can best develop in their early years. Together these put disadvantaged children, who are less likely to benefit from a positive learning environment at home, at an unequal footing when they start school. The most effective step that Costa Rica can take to improve overall educational outcomes is to expand access to quality pre-school education whilst improving care opportunities and parental support for the most disadvantaged. Such a step jump requires greater leadership and investment in the sector.

From access to basic education to learning for all

After universalising access to basic schooling, Costa Rica is confronted to the challenge of improving teaching and learning so that all students acquire the foundation skills that will enable them to move forward in the system. By the end of basic education, 33% of Costa Rican students lack core competencies and 30% have already dropped out of school. To raise student learning, the single most powerful measure that Costa Rica can take is to set high standards for teachers and support them to continuously improve their practice, whilst focusing support more strategically on the schools who need it the most. This will require building a virtuous culture for improvement and accountability at all levels.

Rethinking upper secondary education

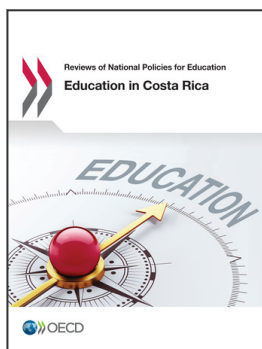
Costa Rica extended compulsory schooling to upper secondary education in 2011, recognising that this is the desired minimum attainment level for success in work and life. About 51% of Costa Rican 25-34 year-olds have not attained upper secondary education compared to just 6% in OECD countries. They risk poor job and life prospects in the increasingly dual labour market and growing levels of inequality. The reform of upper secondary education, from preparing students to university to enabling them to pursue a greater diversity of career paths, has become an urgency to make the system more inclusive. This means improving teaching in the schools with the highest dropout levels to keep students engaged, redesigning the end-of-cycle *Bachillerato* certifying examination, and strengthening vocational education institutions and pathways.

Tertiary education and its role in a growing economy

The rapid expansion of tertiary education in the last decades reflects its vital role for Costa Rica's competitiveness in the global and knowledge-driven economy. The gross enrolment rate has doubled to reach 51%, and more than fifty new universities have been created amidst weak regulation and licensing. This has raised the need for a comprehensive reform of the sector factoring this new reality and responding to the aspirations of the country. At present, the government has no mechanisms to increase Science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) graduates, collect data on student enrolment or take stringent action against poor quality universities. The reform should lead to stronger stewardship of the sector, more equitable and strategic funding, and greater transparency and quality assurance.

Steering the system to higher levels of performance

Addressing these challenges will require a more strategic and systematic approach to education governance and funding. At 8% of gross domestic product (GDP), which is more than what any OECD and Latin American country spends in education, the country can show more in terms of school completion and student learning. If education is to remain an engine for development, a significant change is needed to how policies are designed, funded and delivered.



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