UNIVERSITY OF COSTA RICA

EVALUATION REPORT

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1. Introduction

This report is the result of the evaluation of the University of Costa Rica. The evaluation took place in 2018.

1.1 Institutional Evaluation Programme

The Institutional Evaluation Programme (IEP) is an independent membership service of the European University Association (EUA) that offers evaluations to support the participating institutions in the continuing development of their strategic management and internal quality culture. IEP is a full member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and is listed in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR).

The distinctive features of IEP are:
- A strong emphasis on the self-evaluation phase
- A European and international perspective
- A peer-review approach
- A support to improvement

The focus of IEP is the institution as a whole and not the individual study programmes or units. It focuses upon:
- Decision-making processes and institutional structures and effectiveness of strategic management
- Relevance of internal quality processes and the degree to which their outcomes are used in decision-making and strategic management as well as perceived gaps in these internal mechanisms.

All aspects of the evaluation are guided by four key questions, which are based on a "fitness for (and of) purpose" approach:
- What is the institution trying to do?
- How is the institution trying to do it?
- How does the institution know it works?
- How does the institution change in order to improve?

1.2 University of Costa Rica's profile

From its 19th century origins and its foundation in the 20th century, the University of Costa Rica (UCR) has been firmly embedded in the national context and engaged in the dynamics of the country's political and economic development. It is the country's largest, oldest and most prestigious university with a solid reputation in the Central American region and, UCR advised, was placed in the range 411-420 in 2018 in the QS World University Ranking.

Its autonomy is an essential part of its identity and, as the President told the evaluation team, the university sees itself as a key influencer of Costa Rican society and a defender of political

and human rights in Costa Rica. Its constitution, approved by the University Assembly, named the Organic Statute, sets out a number of key principles (non-discrimination, dialogue, culture of peace, social engagement, equality) which inform UCR's declared values and define its self-image.

UCR's mission is defined in the Organic Statute "as a public higher education and culture institution, constitutionally autonomous and democratic. It promotes critical thinking, humanism and culture. It is made up of a community of faculty members, students, and administrative staff who are active agents of the transformations needed in society to achieve common good by teaching, research and social action activities that aim at ensuring social justice, equity, comprehensive development, freedom and independence of our people." UCR's vision is similarly defined as "must endorse the transformations that society requires to achieve common good by teaching, research and social action activities that aim at ensuring social justice, equity, comprehensive development, freedom and independence of our people." Most notable and distinctive in those definitions is the parity of esteem in which UCR's three key activities of research, teaching and social action are held.

UCR has over 40,000 students and nearly 9,500 employees. Although its main campus is in the capital city, San Jose, UCR is a truly national institution with decentralised, regional campuses, *Sedes*, in five other cities and smaller community education bases, *Recintos*, in more isolated settlements.

1.3 The evaluation process

The self-evaluation process was undertaken a Self-Evaluation Group (SEG) made up of key academic and advisory staff from the Office of the Provost, including the Academic Evaluation Centre (CEA), appointed by the Vice-President (Academic Affairs), also known as the Provost, and of other senior personnel from across UCR, including the Vice-President (Research), the Vice-President (Social Action), the Vice-President (Student Affairs), the Director of the University Planning Office (OPLAU), the Director of the Human Resources Office and the Director of the Office of International Affairs and Foreign Cooperation. Although most of the SEG members currently held senior status positions, UCR advised that they also had significant teaching, research, social action and other faculty level experience from previous posts held.

The SEG brought together a range of operational and strategic information sources and sought to synthesize and summarise it in addition to consulting the units concerned so as to produce a summary for the self-evaluation report (SER). Unfortunately, due to a misunderstanding of the IEP process, students were not involved in the SEG, and the SER was not widely circulated before the IEP evaluation team's first visit. Consequently, most staff and all the students whom the evaluation team met had not been involved in the preparation of, or had even seen, the SER. This omission was rectified before the evaluation team's second visit and the SER was duly circulated within UCR including the staff and students whom the

evaluation team met. The external stakeholders whom the evaluation team met were aware of the evaluation process but again had not participated in the preparation of the SER.

The SER did not include a detailed SWOT analysis. However, in discussion with the President and SEG a number of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats were identified, some of which were also implicit in the analytical element of the SER. The SER, and its accompanying appendices in particular, were mainly descriptive with substantial amounts of detailed statistical and regulatory information. This was somewhat episodic with little consistent, holistic narrative. Moreover, much of the supporting documentation was in Spanish, although UCR did respond positively to the request for translation into English of certain key documents.

The President emphasised that UCR welcomed external feedback and he highlighted the complex and lengthy nature of Costa Rican study programme accreditation as a particular reason why this external, institutional approach by IEP was valued. The documentation supplied by UCR also confirmed that an external accreditation was a condition of a large World Bank loan obtained by UCR to resource campus development.

The SER, together with its appendices, was sent to the evaluation team three weeks before the first visit. The first and second visits of the evaluation team to UCR took place on 19-21 August 2018 and 21-24 October 2018, respectively. In between the visits UCR provided the evaluation team with some additional documentation.

The evaluation team (hereafter named the team) consisted of:

- Tatjana Volkova, Professor and formerly Rector, BA (Banka augstskola) School of Business and Finance, Riga, Latvia, team chair
- Carmen Fenoll, Professor of Plant Biology and formerly Vice Rector for Academic Affairs and the Bologna Process, Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha, Spain
- Derin Ural, Professor in Practice, Department of Civil, Architectural and Environmental Engineering, University of Miami, United States of America, and formerly Vice Rector, Academic and International Affairs, Istanbul Technical University, Turkey
- Adrian Stan, student, University of Medicine and Pharmacy "Victor Babes", Timisoara, Romania
- Gregory Clark, formerly Associate Secretary, University of Salford, United Kingdom, team coordinator

The team thanks the President, Henning Jensen Pennington (and the Vice-Presidents who deputised for him in all but one meeting with the team) and all his staff and students at UCR for their engagement in the evaluation process and for their hospitality. The team thanks the University Assembly, the Vice Presidency of Academic Affairs and the President for their invitation to the team to carry out the evaluation. The team especially thanks Armando

Vargas Morera, Logistics and Communication Assistant, Office of the Provost, the liaison person, for his outstanding commitment and dedicated support throughout the process.

2. Governance and institutional decision-making

As part of the autonomy guaranteed to public universities by the Costa Rican constitution, UCR is able to design its own governance and management arrangements, provided that they are compatible with national legislation. Although funded significantly by Central Government, UCR is not directed by the Costa Rican executive or legislature. UCR's constitution and governance and management arrangements are set out at length and in detail in the Organic Statute.

The University Assembly, comprised of over 3,000 members, acts through "two arms": the Assembly by Plebiscite and the Representative Collegiate Assembly, the latter a subset of around 600-700 members which determines changes to regulations. The University Assembly includes all tenured staff and is the highest authority in UCR. It elects the University Council and the President. It determines broad policy matters and approves changes to structure. It oversees any significant amendments to the Organic Statute and is the determining body if a dispute arises between the University Council and the President. The University Council has 12 members, including two student representatives in accord with a UCR requirement that 25% of places on academic deliberative committees are reserved for students. Other members comprise a representative elected from each academic area, a member representing all Sedes, the President, an administrative representative (elected by professional services staff) and an external member representing the *Colegios Profesionales*. The University Council members advised the team that they had a sound, professional working relationship with the President.

Senate, which operates through specific committees which it establishes, is akin to a traditional Senate but with responsibility for more than merely academic matters. It organises the implementation of broad policies set by the University Assembly, approves the budget and determines its internal allocation, approves partnerships with national and international partners, and approves procedures and regulations. University Council and Senate committees are made up of members of University Council and Professional Services staff and provide a space for discussion and analysis of possible regulatory changes. They tend to work by considering responses to published internal consultations and to seek consensus, although votes have also been taken.

The President is the highest academic executive staff member. He presides the Representative Collegiate Assembly and is a member of the University Assembly and the University Council. The President is appointed by the University Assembly for a four-year term, renewable once only, similar to the practice frequently found internationally. The President formally represents UCR and is accountable for its activities; implements decisions of the University Council but may require further consideration beforehand by the President's Council (in effect a board of executive staff); oversees the granting of UCR academic awards; and has a specific brief to promote harmony and reconcile any disputes which arise in UCR. The President informs about the appointments and dismissals of Vice-Presidents of which

there are currently five: Administration, Research, Academic Affairs, Social Action, and Student Life. All have detailed briefs and responsibilities set out in the Organic Statute.

The university has a hierarchical unit structure of areas (fine arts and letters; basic sciences; social sciences; engineering; health; agro-sciences) each made up of one or more faculties which are in turn made up of schools. The different levels have similar academic deliberative committee arrangements to those applying at institutional level. Schools may in turn have constituent departments. Academic leadership in the faculty is provided by the Dean and in the school by the Director of School. Once again, the Organic Statute sets out their respective detailed briefs and responsibilities. The Dean is elected by the Faculty Assembly for a four-year term and serves for a maximum of two consecutive terms. The Dean chairs the Faculty Assembly. The Deans described their role as negotiator, promoter of interdisciplinary activities, overseer of infrastructure, and coordinator on behalf of the faculty with the Vice-Presidents and President. They described their relationship with the executive as working well. The Director of School is elected by the School Assembly for a four-year term and serves for a maximum of two consecutive terms. The Director of School chairs the School Assembly and effectively has responsibility for staff and student matters at school level.

These arrangements are also mirrored in the roles of the Directors of *Sede*, again elected positions, at the five UCR *Sedes* (*Occidente*; *Guanacaste*; *Atlántico*; *Caribe*; and *Pacífico*) and their *Sede* Assemblies. *Sedes* are managed with a certain degree of autonomy but are also subject to some centralisation. They receive a delegated budget and may bid for an additional budget. *Sede* staff enjoy the same salary levels as their main campus counterparts but the academic staff are usually less research active but probably more engaged with UCR's social action initiatives. The Directors report to the executive of President and Vice-Presidents but maintain academic relationships with faculties and schools where these offer the same study programmes as those delivered at the *Sedes*. In some instances, *Sedes* act as feeder providers for study programmes completed at the main campus or complemented there by related postgraduate provision. In other cases, the entire study programme is delivered at the *Sede*.

Sedes are seen to have a particular responsibility in fostering the economic and cultural development of the region in which they are located. They are also responsible for coordinating the activities of the remotely located *Recintos*, which offer a limited range of provision in isolated locales, although the *Golfito Recinto* also hosts an internationally recognised research facility in ecology.

UCR's formal strategic planning documentation comprises:

- A set of Institutional Policies 2016-2020 that contains the objectives and goals for each of the projected work axes.

- An Institutional Strategic Plan 2013-2017 which describes how, through strategic planning, the institution articulates a coherent vision of the future as a first step to achieve its overarching societal goals, illustrated through strategic axes, objectives, strategies and goals. OPLAU staff advised that UCR had begun work in the National

Council of Public University Presidents (CONARE) context and taking account of a forthcoming national strategic plan scheduled for June 2020, on a new institutional strategic plan. This included work by the University Council on institutional policies, again in the context of CONARE. In the view of OPLAU staff, compatibility with the national strategic plan and cooperation in the CONARE context were more important factors than the influence of individual UCR presidents on strategic direction.

- The President's Annual Report is the main UCR accountability mechanism, presented by its highest academic authority and includes updates on progress and development in relation to academic matters, student-life, management and social action.

In its SER and in discussion with the Rector, the team was advised that strategic planning was not a strength of UCR, possibly as a result of its multi-campus and extended structure. Institutional level decisions lost some of their power when transmitted down through 57 faculties and 98 research centres on different campuses and serving a highly diverse student population. Despite a general broad understanding of the values which underpinned UCR, academic staff tended to identify more with their faculty and school rather than with the university. For example, the staff whom the team met offered a range of interpretations of what UCR's core values actually comprised. If UCR ensured that those core values were more clearly defined, articulated and, especially, promulgated to all staff and students, they would be better known and recognisable to the whole university community and would more consistently inform practice.

To some extent faculties came across as being concentrated on a local agenda, such as specific external accreditations and partnerships with professional bodies and associated employers, rather than on matters which might have more institutional impact. Some deans did however acknowledge the importance of alignment with the institutional strategic plan in relation to certain institutional initiatives, such as investment in facilities for teaching and research, staff development and improvements in the overall student experience. Those deans, however, also pointed out that schools, working with their departments, had their own local strategic plans. Therefore, although an individual dean might perhaps aspire to greater cross-faculty and transdisciplinary working, it was a matter of convincing and persuading schools to adopt a proposal rather than of enforcing alignment with an institutional or faculty proposal. These local agendas resulted, in some instances, in dissonance from UCR-level priorities and strategic goals.

Throughout UCR there was a good understanding of the respective detailed briefs and responsibilities set out in the Organic Statute and the deans described their role as potentially "operating on occasion slightly beyond those limits that but mostly operating within them". The culture, as described by the Vice-President (Student Affairs) in relation to policies on curricular change, is one where the higher level has to persuade the lower level(s) of the merit in adopting its policies or encouraging their adoption by the improved availability of funding and resources. As an alternative to that hierarchical approach and whatever perceived inhibitions arise from the detailed articulation of university remits and

responsibilities set out in the Organic Statute, UCR might be better served by a culture that actively pursues, embraces and develops creative change, identifying and fostering beneficial change through pilot projects and the identification of change agents. That culture should encourage more self-criticism (the team saw the absence of a detailed SWOT analysis from the SER as somewhat symptomatic and noted that UCR did not consistently reflect on how its successes had been achieved and how such successes could influence practice across the institution) and a more holistic approach, with less "thinking in silos", with regard to problem solving. In several meetings, especially but not solely with professional services staff, the team heard that some processes do not work ideally but that this was the way UCR's arrangements were structured or that the particular process – though recognised as not optimum – was not within the specifics of the unit responding to the team.

There is a general view amongst academic staff, and to some extent also among students, that UCR's professional services tended to be over-bureaucratic and operational and thus insufficiently customer-responsive and service-oriented. In line, OPLAU is viewed as an engine for structuring the budget rather than planning the future strategic direction of the university. OPLAU staff confirmed that UCR does not use key performance indicators or benchmark against comparator institutions in its formal strategic planning process but advised that certain "management indicators" are in use across different units and that there are some indicators in the supporting annual operating plan. Additionally, even OPLAU and formal UCR strategic planning documentation sometimes use strategic planning terminology without precision, where terms such as objective, aim and goal are used almost interchangeably. OPLAU emphasised that strategic planning was a fully participative process within UCR and that they played a significant role in engaging all units across UCR through dedicated training.

Many associated administrative processes, for example those around research project approval and interdisciplinary study programme approval, were seen to be repetitive and almost ritualistic, having lost sight of the bigger picture of the facilitation rather than the inhibition of UCR's activities. The SER advises that a performance management system be put in place to monitor and evaluate professional support services staff. However, the team is of the view that it would serve UCR well to continually review its professional support services with the aim of eliminating any unnecessary bureaucracy and promoting a more service-oriented approach.

The team was made aware of a 2010 University Council Policy on Innovation and Entrepreneurship and discussed with external employers and senior staff UCR's relatively limited engagement with employers and the somewhat limited stakeholder involvement of employers in the development of UCR (see Teaching and Learning and Service to Society Sections below). In the team's view, in order to remain relevant and sustainable UCR should draw on external and internal expertise so as to nurture an innovation culture that enhances creativity, stimulates openness to new ideas, and creates an awareness of the benefits resulting from the implementation of innovations across UCR and minimises resistance to change. This should be across the full range of UCR activities including innovations in marketing and communication, strategic planning, career development, teaching and learning

(in such aspects as curricula design based on learning outcomes, a student-centered approach to learning and new teaching and learning technologies), research management, and internationalisation. The team saw innovation and entrepreneurship as areas where the broadest possible generation of inputs would benefit UCR. It suggests the establishment of an advisory mechanism to assist the University Council, with both external and internal membership, to generate and manage the initial development of new ideas and innovation, to become an accessible platform for interested external stakeholders, staff and students and to strengthen the reputation of the institution nationally and its visibility internationally.

The Costa Rican constitution requires the attribution of 8% of GDP for education, and a national settlement promises 1.5% of GDP to public universities, yet to be achieved, although recently the actual amount has reduced from around 1.4% to just over 1.3%. Nevertheless, this represents a relatively generous level of central government funding and UCR has at times been criticized in some public political forums for what some view as preferential treatment in a time of economic pressures on the State. The current funding settlement for public universities will expire soon and negotiations must take place with a new government. In the past UCR has been successful in negotiating sufficient revenue and capital resources to maintain and develop the institution and has supplemented those resources through a major loan for improved capital infrastructure through the World Bank.

The SER advises that the Costa Rican Congress approves the national ordinary budget which includes funding for public higher education. The General Controllership of the Republic evaluates and approves or rejects UCR's budget bid (prepared by the President and subsequently approved by the University Council), as well as supervises and externally audits the implementation of the UCR's budget and regulates the appropriate use of public funds. The consequent State grant, via the "Higher Education State Special Fund" (FEES), comprises the major element of UCR's budget (73%), which is supplemented by other annual state subsidies, other external funding sources, revenue from the exploitation of its assets, asset and service sales, tariffs, copyright revenues, loans, ordinary and extraordinary grants, donations accepted by the University Council, and miscellaneous income sources. The University Council defines the general policies upon which internal allocation of the approved budget takes place, informed by funding priorities determined by the President and President's Council, as set out in annual operating plans. The Vice-Presidents may also set budget priorities in their respective spheres. The deans whom the team met saw UCR's income generation as mainly a matter for the executive level. Again, it is the President's annual report which forms the main UCR accountability mechanism.

Senior professional services staff confirmed that effectively the annual budgeting process is incremental, usually reflecting the previous year's budget with some revisions. The budgeting process starts with an indicative allocation to each academic and other unit which, with the assistance of budgeting software, put forward bids and made comments. Finance staff then aggregates bids and comments from those lower level units and compares proposed expenditure against projected income. This budget is then reviewed by the President and, after University Council and central government endorsement, is allocated through the Vice-

Presidents to the academic and other units. This mainly incremental approach means that there is little articulation of financial planning with new and developmental UCR strategic goals, and that no contingency arrangements for major variations to income or expenditure are evidenced, other than cost reduction proposals and across the board percentage deductions from previous allocations.

The SER sets out UCR's priorities with regard to human resources:

- hiring and retaining the best staff for all its activities;

- promoting professional development by providing employees with appropriate salary conditions and acknowledging their academic merits;

- allocating academic staff on an equitable basis across the institution;

- decreasing the number of untenured teachers by offering qualified teachers tenured positions through competition and qualifications assessment;

- granting untenured academic staff renewable annual contracts if they have been appointed on at least a 0.75FTE basis for two consecutive years;

- reducing the number of untenured teachers by allowing them to compete for tenure after five years on at least a 0.75FTE basis; guaranteeing equal opportunities in selection;

- increasing by 20% every year the number of academic staff doctoral scholarships for study abroad; promoting the creation of a programme in the Vice-Presidency of Social Action devoted to supporting spaces, actions and projects so as to keep strong connections between the UCR and its graduates in order to learn from their experience and knowledge and use it to further develop the country;

- defending the rights of UCR's retired staff and to incorporate them in its activities so that benefit may be drawn from their knowledge and expertise.

The academic staff whom the team met were familiar with the UCR workload balancing mechanism which allowed for teaching to be reduced to reflect a management/administrative role or a research project. They reported that individual choice and discipline interests could inform that theoretical balance of 25% for teaching, research, social action and management/administration. An end-of-year discussion is held with the Director of School to set the coming year's balance. Some staff reported that in practice the time allowed for reduction of teaching tended not to cover all demands, especially in relation to administration. An example was cited of increased reporting and coordination requirements in relation to social action being imposed without any reflection of the workload balance. Non-tenured staff believed themselves to be particularly disadvantaged by this mechanism, suggesting that the preferences of tenured staff are usually a priority and non-tenured staff tends to be left with the heaviest and least interesting teaching loads.

All the academic staff whom the team met were fully aware of the detailed criteria for promotion to successive levels up to full professor. However, the team heard more than once that, where an individual is not seeking promotion or has already achieved the level of full professorship, there is little incentive, beyond personal motivation, to achieve anything other than the minimum required. The view was offered that there is little to take such staff out of their "comfort zone". On-going performance management and appraisal has little impact. If performance management and appraisal are negative and identified under-performance, essentially because of the protection of tenure, there is little consequence. Senior staff were aware of this issue but did not suggest to the team how it might be addressed. If performance management and appraisal are positive and identify good performance some limited discretionary funds are available to each dean to enhance salaries, although the general opinion was that research excellence rather than teaching excellence or commitment to social action was what brought recognition, promotion and reward. Some academic staff also queried the objectivity of appointments made by school assemblies which they perceived as very political, reflecting personal dislikes or prejudices regarding subject specialism biases. In particular, they viewed the emphasis given to having studied for a PhD abroad as being a disproportionate criterion, meaning that, arguably, staff with more profound experience and qualifications but who had not studied for a PhD abroad were disadvantaged.

Some senior staff doubted whether the existing workload mechanism is enough to motivate staff. In terms of teaching, some academic staff believed that they were somewhat overloaded, not just by over at least 10 direct contact hours each week, but also by the cohort sizes of sometimes between 60 and 80 students. In terms of research, it was recognised that individual high performing researchers had a better chance of internal project funding or support for networking.

To some extent, there was already recognition within UCR of certain weaknesses in the human resources approach. The team learnt that the criteria for recruiting academic staff does not include teaching proficiency. The current approach is to monitor teaching proficiency after appointment and to offer development opportunities to those staff who required them. This is inappropriate both in terms of securing the best staff to teach its students but also in terms of adding to staff development costs. In the team's view, UCR will wish to consider both teaching experience and proficiency as important criteria in the recruitment of academic staff.

The team also heard that UCR had not yet fully addressed issues in relation to succession planning. Although it now offers support and development for new and recently appointed academic staff, there are insufficient qualified and research active staff in the "middle generation" to replace a large cohort of their counterparts who are approaching retirement.

Overall the students whom the team met had sound relationships with their lecturers and appreciated their guidance and informal feedback. They were valued as approachable, accessible, knowledgeable and often expert practitioners and academics, and often with significant experience abroad. Instances were cited of academic staff directly consulting

students on such issues as how delivery might be improved and how the study programme might be better shaped to reflect industry practice and their employment needs.

The team heard that there is a strong and active student movement at both institutional and local levels. UCR organises student association activities such as free feature films, theatre performances and sports events and each school (and each *Sede*) has a form of local student association. Students also reported good UCR support in student representatives' attendance at external events such as student congresses. Students elect their peers as representatives to 25% of the seats of every School Council. Through that mechanism the students saw themselves as both well represented and well informed, even on such crucial matters as the appointment of a new Director of School. Nevertheless, there was some student dissatisfaction with how attentively they are listened to (especially beyond study programme level) and the variability of feedback on the UCR response on whether action, or at least consideration of action, resulted from their representations and suggested changes.

The team recommends that the university:

Ensure that its core values are more clearly defined, articulated and communicated to all staff and students so that they are recognisable by the university community.

Promote a culture which embraces and develops creative change, for example, identify and foster beneficial change through pilot projects and the identification of change agents.

Ensure the application of the latest strategic planning approaches, for example, the full use of key performance indicators (KPIs) and benchmarking.

Ensure the meaningful use of terminology is applied throughout the full strategic planning process.

Eliminate any unnecessary bureaucracy and promote a more user-oriented approach.

Ensure more reflective and self-critical thinking on achievements to enhance capacity for change.

Consider an advisory mechanism, with both external and internal input, to assist UCR strategically to generate and manage the initial development of new ideas and innovation, and also to strengthen UCR's reputation nationally and its visibility internationally.

Consider teaching experience and proficiency as important criteria in the recruitment and promotion of academic staff.

3. Quality culture

In the SER, UCR asserts an "aspiration that all its activities meet high standards, the institution proposes to strengthen key activities related to teaching, research, and social action and to maximise their coordination in order to achieve the institutional mission. This process pays special attention to self-evaluation processes, the use of state-of-the-art technology in all areas, continuous training of human talent and internationalization processes." The SER suggests that this will be carried out through approved quality assurance processes which:

- "support all academic units and graduate programs so that they implement self-evaluation processes that address pertinence, quality, management of study programs no longer than every 10 years.

- design and implement a self-evaluation institutional model that positions knowledge and institutional experience at the highest level to establish academic excellence standards pertinent to a public university.

- strengthen, first of all, self-evaluation and self-regulation institutional process and, whenever it is financially and academically necessary, it will support and foster certification processes, national or international accreditation processes for undergraduate and graduate programs of administrative units and institutional processes."

In brief, there is an emphasis on self-evaluation and, although there is a clear steer towards a strategic approach, a number of the elements within that approach remain aspirational. The SER statements concur with the discussion the team had with the President on quality culture. The President recognised the need for continuous improvement, that the culture of quality was not universally apparent throughout UCR, although many elements of the quality assurance infrastructure were now in place, and that UCR still had steps to take on its journey. However, he also asserted that UCR is open to facilitate the further engagement with a quality culture, citing the use of an external, English language, process such as IEP. He welcomed the opportunity for UCR to look at emergent practice in foreign peers as opposed to merely discharging its leading national role as the premier higher education institution and believed that this external process might assist in a shift in internal quality culture. He saw the move towards greater internal self-evaluation as still in development, especially at school level. He viewed CEA as responsible for taking that development forward with regard to teaching and learning. He further advised that separate arrangements had been put in place for quality assurance in research.

In response to student representations and as an example of how well quality systems and procedures are disseminated within the UCR community, the team explored the arrangements for countering sexual harassment or gender discrimination. The team learnt that there are indeed UCR policies and protocols based on national norms as well as appropriate institutional commitments made at the highest level and operational through

specialist working teams, collaboration with student associations and staff training. Nevertheless, the team also heard that, at local level, there was no overt reinforcement or targeting of UCR policies and protocols on campuses where it was known that such occurrences were more frequent, and where there was insufficient staff knowledge of the policies and protocols. Indeed, the team heard students' views that, in practice, UCR tends to protect the predator rather than support the victim. The team is convinced of UCR's embedded commitment to equality and diversity but suggests that it might wish to ensure increased awareness across the whole UCR community of the policies and protocols which underpin that commitment, for example, those relating to sexual harassment or gender discrimination.

In discussion with the SEG and other staff, the team heard that information and data within UCR were hard to marshal and assemble. Information is held in a number of locations such as schools, faculties, CEA and the Research Office. CEA staff advised that often they were briefed to coordinate the gathering of information and that UCR was seeking to establish a cross-institutional data platform. This was seen as a way of overcoming the difficult coordination of quality assurance systems and management information deriving from UCR's hierarchical structure. Schools, for example, gather information to carry out curricular evaluation of their study programmes, but are more interested in the specific details about those study programmes rather than a normative and comprehensive analysis of comparative performance. The team values this intended development.

UCR was said to be data rich and to use a great deal of information and processes capable of demonstrating quality. However, the data management and existence of different systems in different schools were seen as problematic. Software was said to be in the first phase of development to deal with that problem. It had been tested but its impact is yet to be assessed and a programme for academic and administrative staff training on the use of such a system is required. The team welcomes the work in progress in this area and encourages UCR to systematise the current range of diverse and somewhat fragmented quality mechanisms within the university.

UCR places great emphasis on the student evaluative questionnaire to be completed by all students every semester, not least as a prime mechanism for assessing the teaching performance of individual lecturers. Steps have been taken to maximise completion rates, such as shepherding cohorts of students to computer laboratories to complete the questionnaires. The process is overseen by the Vice-President (Academic Affairs) and designed by CEA who have taken a number of initiatives to tailor them to elicit a high volume of responses, including the introduction of open text responses. The Vice-Dean in each faculty is responsible for the analysis of responses and aggregated results are published at departmental level. However, in discussion with staff, the team heard that those arrangements for analysis were not consistently applied and that the data generated was not appropriately consolidated and analysed across all levels. Moreover, feedback was not necessarily given directly to students, even if their criticisms were in some way taken into account by UCR.

In terms of their use as a teaching performance mechanism, schools are required to discuss any adverse evaluation with poorly performing staff. However, there is usually little action other than referral to remedial course attendance. Similarly, there is no UCR mechanism for student-based awards for best teaching practice. The Vice-President (Academic Affairs) might copy an adverse evaluation to a dean and director of school but ultimately it is the latter who determines the appropriate follow-up action, although information is publicly accessible. The consensus view of academic staff and students was that even an adverse evaluation would not result in staff changes or bear any significant impact. On the other hand, the team also heard of initiatives, at local rather than institutional level, of the introduction of academic staff self-evaluation mechanisms.

The students whom the team met felt overall that there was no true accountability through the student evaluative questionnaire mechanism and regretted that, for example, the dean did not provide direct feedback to the student body on outcomes. They saw the questions as limited. For example, the lack of specific questions on student evaluation mean that effectively there is no UCR compulsory requirement for student evaluation of study programmes themselves. The students did, however, confirm that the questionnaires were usually completed and that they were confident that their individual feedback was confidential and anonymous. Exceptions to this were postgraduate taught study programmes and study programmes at the *Sedes* where, because of smaller numbers, the students felt more identifiable by academic staff with whom they might have to study throughout their study programme. They also reported variations in school level practice in relation to their administration, including students on some study programmes who are missing out because of different non-standard study programme delivery timings resulting in questionnaires having to be submitted before the completion of courses/modules. Students also reported considerable variations in feedback to them from individual lecturers about their evaluations.

The team sees clear scope for more benefit to be derived from the current system's student evaluative questionnaire. UCR should reappraise the questions asked in the questionnaires, consulting both expert instructional designers and students themselves, so as to focus upon facets of key importance. It should also review how and where questionnaires are analysed and consolidated and ensure their use is fully maximised at each level (study programme, school, faculty, institution) as well as ensure that the analysis of student questionnaires and resultant actions are duly fed back to students.

The team recommends that the university:

Continue the systemisation of the current range of diverse, and somewhat fragmented, quality mechanisms within the university.

Continue the efforts to better integrate its different sources of management information.

Increase awareness of UCR policies and protocols which underpin its commitment to equality and diversity across the whole UCR community, for example, those relating to sexual harassment or gender discrimination.

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Reappraise the questions asked in the student evaluative questionnaires, consulting both expert instructional designers and students themselves, so as to focus upon facets of key importance.

Ensure student questionnaires are consistently applied and consolidated to maximise the measurement of student satisfaction across UCR.

Ensure feedback to students on the analysis of student questionnaires and actions taken.

4. Teaching and learning

UCR has a comprehensive portfolio of study programmes across a very broad range of subject disciplines at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Study programmes may have pathways, but generally the proportion of student choice of modules is minimal. The academic staff estimated compulsory modules to be 90%-95% of a study programme, which limits the opportunities for students to undertake interdisciplinary study in related areas. In terms of portfolio development, the team heard the senior staff describe innovative proposals such as a Masters' programme by e-learning and further development of lifelong learning. However, they regretted that UCR did not sufficiently promote interdisciplinarity, claiming that each head of department involved must approve any such collaboration. They viewed this as a bureaucratic inhibitor of interdisciplinarity, perhaps aimed at protecting the purity of their subject discipline. The team would encourage promoting the development of more interdisciplinary study programmes, not least by removing any inhibitors to interdisciplinarity whether they be structural, bureaucratic or cultural.

There was general recognition of CEA as the vehicle for assisting faculties in developing teaching and learning and assessment, although the team learnt that CEA's remit does not extend to Masters' and doctoral programmes. The team learnt from a number of sources of problems, for example in completion rates and in individual career progression, created by the length of study before completion at Master level (and consequently the knock-on effect to any subsequent doctoral level study). The length of study, as described, was sometimes well beyond the international norm.

UCR claims to be pioneer from the late 1980's onwards of the national system of accreditation of study programmes. The process for internal and national accreditation of study programmes by the SINAES (Sistema Nacional de Acreditación de la Educación Superior) is certainly complex, and not all UCR study programmes are yet accredited. Senior staff acknowledged that the process, which includes a school self-evaluation, a CEA review and the appointment of *catedras* – improvement teams for study programmes needing remedial action before accreditation – is slow and they estimated that only two or three study programmes a year gain accreditation.

Senior staff claimed that UCR's goal is to accredit all study programmes. However, they reported a certain resistance to a cross-UCR standardised quality culture, of which a goal to accredit all study programmes is one element. Different cultures operate in different schools and academic autonomy is one of UCR's keystones. Nevertheless, the team sees scope for UCR to drive forward an accelerated schedule of study programme accreditations, setting faculty level targets for accreditations and perhaps incentivising programme teams to ensure prompt and successful accreditation of their study programmes.

Some faculties have sought external accreditation from foreign quality assurance agencies or national and international professional bodies, partly due to the slowness of the national process but also to add to the perceived prestige of the study programmes, to enhance

employability and to benchmark against international practice. For example, the Faculty of Engineering accredited five of its nine study programmes through the Canadian Accreditation Board and had some others reviewed by the Federal College of Costa Rican Engineers. The view of senior staff in that faculty was that this external process encouraged schools to become better organised, especially with regard to gathering information and analysis, although the team did not hear how that good practice would have been extended to other parts of the faculty or across UCR.

The study programmes are designed by a School or a Faculty then the curricula is revised by CEA, approved by the Vice Presidency of Academic Affairs and the Rectory, followed by the standard national CONARE approval. UCR also has a range of study programmes taught at more than one campus. These are led by the originating campus, usually the main campus, which has oversight of the suitability of academic staff teaching on the study programme at other campuses. UCR has arrangements in place to ensure consistency of delivery and academic standards for shared study programmes, including: two formal co-ordination meetings of all campuses involved, the same examinations, identical certification although the campus of study would be cited, the sharing of facilities and resources where feasible, and an expectation of informal contacts between the programme teams on a regular basis. In some instances, a shared study programme may be entirely delivered at one campus. In others, for example, a School, Faculty or *Sede* may deliver the early years of a study programme and the final years would be held on another campus, usually the main campus.

In practice the team heard from a number of sources that there were challenges, if not problems, with assuring the standards of study programmes delivered at more than one campus. For example, although teaching has the same study plan on all campuses, the updates were not applied across them all equally. For example, some might place more emphasis on a certain aspect of a programme, such as entrepreneurialism, than would others. Even though the curriculum was identical, an accredited programme would not carry carry that accreditation across all campuses. However, the staff whom the team met argued that a UCR degree from any campus would offset any disadvantage that the study programme might have if not accredited at a particular campus. Separate accreditation would be held for each campus of delivery.

Most notably there is no mechanism within UCR to have an overview of student achievement in order to compare the same study programmes across different campuses and the team was not informed about any such comparisons. The team suggests that an institutional and faculty level comparison of student achievement across study programmes, and especially across campuses offering the same study programmes, would be beneficial to UCR.

It is the schools that monitor the study programmes, under the Head of School rather than the Dean, and carry out regular curricular evaluations. The usual practice would be to involve external stakeholders if more in-depth remodelling is being considered or if the school is seeking to embed better student competences in an aspect such as entrepreneurship.

As cited in the SER, UCR's mission refers to the promotion of critical thinking. In discussion with senior staff the team learnt that this is largely left to the discretion of the faculties and that often study programmes rely on traditional passive teaching methodologies, partly because of the primacy accorded to academic autonomy in UCR. The team was told by a former Head of School of the negative response he had received to a suggestion of a teaching observation scheme he had proposed, as not being consistent with the culture of academic autonomy in UCR. There is a requirement for all academic staff seeking promotion to have, or to take, an internal teaching qualification. Additionally, CEA was said to retain some oversight in the area of evaluation of teaching practice. If alerted through the student evaluative questionnaire mechanism of an individual lecturer's poor teaching performance, the CEA could also recommend remedial training.

The team also heard of some institutional level initiatives in the field, such as a voluntary programme (with the incentive of additional resources for the study programme for those involved) started in 2012 at the suggestion of the Department of Teaching Training which offers an opportunity to work on the creation of new study programmes and the development of innovative learning spaces. Other initiatives mentioned were the UCR piloting of the infrastructure for a Teaching Innovation virtual platform with follow-up on site experience, and the UCR promotion of project-based learning via such exercises as "NOVA Expos" available to any interested students but not yet embedded as standard.

At local level emphasis is placed on the individual academic staff member's professional expertise and experience, sometimes enhanced by engagement with methodologies encountered during study abroad. Academic staff offered the team many examples of good teaching practice: student showcases; industry-judged competitions; industry-based projects; company shadowing; design simulations; sequenced juxtaposition of theoretical and practical elements; and team-based learning.

Some academic staff argued that they were aware, through the circulation of information of the tools that were available on occasion - at institutional or school level - for staff to develop innovative, student-centred teaching. However, it is a matter for individual staff to decide whether to use those tools or not in their subject areas with minimal institutional or school level encouragement to take part. Some expressed disappointment after attending courses on new teaching methodologies, as these were not deemed relevant to their subject discipline nor suited to the size of their classes and nature of their students. Some argued that students mostly preferred more traditional delivery methods since more effort was required for student centred learning. Academic staff at the *Sede* reported on the availability of similar staff development opportunities, both at the *Sede* itself, including main campus-based staff, and at the main campus.

The students whom the team met confirmed that their experience of the teaching varied considerably. They felt some academic staff to be "out of date" and some practical aspects, such as higher-level skills in clinics and laboratories, were not well taught by staff whose primary responsibilities were in research. On the other hand, they reported an increase in the

amount of transversal study opportunities to work with students from other disciplines within their broad subject areas.

The team sees scope for UCR to take a greater institutional lead in the area of improved and innovative, student-centred teaching. This would include the setting of an institutional standard for teaching excellence; rewarding those who achieved that standard for teaching excellence; ensuring that an up-to-date staff development programme engaged all faculties in the further development of innovative teaching methodologies across all study programmes for both new and existing academic staff; and establishing communities of good teaching practice, such as teaching forums, to allow cross-faculty and cross-institutional peer exchange of innovative teaching methodologies.

The students also were broadly supportive of UCR's School of General Studies which, through its compulsory courses on all undergraduate study programmes, was seen as blending study topics and creating cross-disciplinary study. The provision forms a significant element of individual study, i.e. 12 out of 30 academic credits in the year. They described this provision as "bringing humanity" to the chosen career path and "taking them outside the bubble of protection" of high school in order to open their minds to politics, history and their civic responsibilities. In addition, undergraduate students are required to choose an artistic or sporting activity, or a *seminario de realidad nacional*, which raised awareness of national or community issues complementary to their study programme, as well as carrying out the 300 hours a year of social action (see Service to Society section below). The academic staff valued this systemic broadening of provision and believed it to be adequately resourced and supported by UCR, although there was some concern that the workload on academic staff in the school limited their capacity to follow up research opportunities.

Both academic staff and students viewed the staff/student ratio as "manageable". However, some laboratories were described as "saturated" by students, necessitating timetable fixes such as splitting groups or evening lectures. Nevertheless, some schools felt pressured to admit students beyond the capacity of the current specialist infrastructure.

Academic staff advised that UCR does not currently define learning outcomes within its programme specifications. However, some pilot projects are looking at students' graduation profile, their graduate attributes of competences and skills, and therefore their employability. Academic staff confirmed that different schools have different guidance on how to set out the curriculum as there is no common UCR approach.

There is no national qualifications framework in place in Costa Rica. However, the country is the leading player, through its engineering provision, in an initiative involving several Central American countries aiming to defined graduate attributes, in line with the "Washington Accord", to inform the curriculum. The team sees an opportunity for UCR, starting from the base of the current pilot of competence-based learning, to begin the introduction of learning outcomes across all study programmes, in consultation with external employer stakeholders,

and to initiate academic staff training in the design of learning outcomes and their assessment within the curriculum.

Similarly, assessment is currently seen best addressed within the context of the particular subject discipline and is therefore a matter for local school discretion. For example, students told the team that full assessment criteria were provided in some subject disciplines but only partial assessment criteria in others. In some subject disciplines assessment criteria were sent out eight days in advance but in another they were not known beforehand. More customised assessment arrangements existed in certain subject disciplines, such as one that required at least three judges to be present because of the subjective nature of the assessment and another that applied a step-by-step approach of continuous feedback and guidance. Academic staff whom the team met confirmed that different schools had different guidance on how to assess the curriculum as there is no common UCR approach. The team is uncomfortable with the reported variation in practice which potentially could jeopardise academic standards. UCR already has the CEA mechanism available that could assist faculties and schools to standardise assessment better. The team saw an important role for CEA in the promotion of the standardisation of assessment rubrics and assessment processes across study programmes so that these are equitable for all students.

UCR does operate an institution-wide academic credit system setting out the maximum number of credits in any semester for both undergraduate and postgraduate study programmes. For study programme approval schools have to define by academic credits, based on notional study time, in both lectures and practical classes. Here again, the students reported a certain variability in the way this system was applied by the different schools.

UCR supports its student community in a number of ways. It offers a subsidised bus service for home visits and to places throughout the Central Valley, easily accessible scholarships (sports, income-based, artistic ability, high grades, discipline prizes, disability) ranging from fee waiver to maintenance grants (depending on ability, income and need), staggered payment of scholarships, subsidising residence costs, and comprehensive medical services. Students were generally aware of these and other central support services even if they had not personally had occasion to use them. The team heard that student support was especially strong at *Sedes* when seeking to engage isolated and indigenous communities.

The students whom the team met had in general a high regard for UCR, seeing it as the best university in Costa Rica and on a par with comparative universities in Latin America. They particularly regarded it as better than national private universities and certainly more open-minded and engaged with the outside world. Students with other higher education experience, including foreign universities, generally viewed UCR's buildings and facilities as very good, although students from some study programmes, especially in the area of arts and letters, reported certain infrastructure problems.

The students viewed their home faculties and schools as well connected to, and well regarded by, potential employers. They welcomed both employer involvement in events such as

student competitions and work fairs as well as contacts arranged with alumni. They particularly valued the opportunities offered to them during their studies to carry out work placement and internship opportunities with important employers in their respective fields. They appreciated the high employment rates achieved by UCR graduates, as tracked by CONARE, and were confident of finding employment in their chosen career path thanks to their UCR award. However, the team heard from students that there were differences in the level of support for careers and employability, with some schools offering little guidance on, for example, how a postgraduate thesis might be geared to improve employment prospects or how students might develop innovative or entrepreneurial skills. The team sees clear scope for better integration at institutional level.

UCR's library and learning resources on all campuses are overseen by Head of Library who reports to the Vice-President (Research). The team visited one of three libraries on the main campus and learnt of various recent enhancements such as the increasing emphasis on virtual rather than hard copy resources; remote access to the e-library; the current setting-up of the digital storage of theses; training in the use of the library and learning resources; training in study skills and academic writing; training in academic good practice (anti-plagiarism); support for students with special educational needs; and the provision of a wider range of software so that students were not just dependent on freeware. UCR does not provide individual laptops to students but does have shared use laptops available in libraries.

Students are usually supported in their study programmes by a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), *Mediacion Virtual*, although input from lecturers is promoted by UCR through workshops rather than being mandatory. Lecturer input is overseen at both faculty and school levels. In addition, some schools also require students to use the Google Classroom VLE. The students were appreciative of the opportunities a VLE gave to read up both before and after a lecture and thus to enhance discussion on a topic. However, they also reported variability in the level of useful upload to the VLE according to the study programme, course/module and individual lecturer. There were also considerable differences on the uploading of assignments for assessment through the VLE.

The students confirmed the availability of on-line study programme descriptions, including information on the syllabus, seminars and workshops, reading list, and the overall study plan including choice of electives. Information on assessment criteria was more varied, but some engineering students reported good practice in the provision of defined criteria for such assessments as poster presentations. Work and study in laboratories and other specialist facilities are supported by guidance manuals. The students manifested a general awareness of existing mechanisms such as the complaints process, academic appeals process and personal mitigating circumstances process.

A University Council Policy on Innovation and Entrepreneurship from 2010 forms part of the now extended 2013-2017 Strategic Plan which requires schools to promote innovation. On the grounds that UCR's focus on entrepreneurship and enterprise seems to vary by faculty and school, the CEA reported that it carried out an institutional stock take annually. There is,

for example, no entrepreneur in residence at UCR. Some schools advised that they had their own courses/modules, for example, "How to Create Your Own Enterprise" in electrical engineering. Other schools stated that they had installed an entrepreneurial approach across the study programme, rather than in a single course/module. However, this is generally left to the individual lecturers' discretion and to the students' own initiative. The team acknowledges that schools understand the benefits which might result from such activity in terms of support from national companies, as well as access to equipment and information on current industry practice. Schools tend to have their own relationships with employers, which are often quite prestigious, for the purpose of internships (e.g. law students working in the Supreme Court). However, again the actual student experience depends on the school and the individual study programme as not all schools offer internships.

The team was given a brief tour of the extensive main campus and noted the significant amount of recent new buildings, much of it funded by a World Bank loan. However, during meetings with some senior and other academic staff, again in the area of arts and letters but also in a number of other schools, there was a high level of dissatisfaction with the failure to renew infrastructure or update equipment for particular subject disciplines, even to the extent that this was felt by the staff concerned to have compromised staff health and safety.

The team also responded to UCR's desire to demonstrate its national remit by holding meetings with staff and students at the *Turrialba Sede*.

The team recommends that the university:

Promote the development of more interdisciplinary study programmes and ensure the removal of any structural, bureaucratic or cultural inhibitors.

Set faculty level targets for the accreditation of study programmes.

Ensure institutional and faculty level comparison of student achievement across study programmes and especially across campuses delivering the same study programmes.

Set an institutional standard for teaching excellence and reward achievement.

Ensure up-to-date staff development for all faculties in the further development of innovative teaching methodologies and across all study programmes.

Establish communities of good teaching practice, such as teaching forums, to allow peer exchange of innovative teaching methodologies.

From the base of the current pilot of competence-based learning, introduce learning outcomes across all study programmes and deliver staff training in their design and assessment.

Mandate the CEA to promote the standardisation of assessment rubrics and assessment processes across undergraduate (and preferably postgraduate) study programmes so that these are equitable for all students.

Review the better integration with local academic units of the provision of careers and employability support.

5.   Research

In its SER UCR described in detail the alignment of its research approach with its strategic planning, advising that its "research policies are structured in terms of axes, strategic objectives and strategies established by the UCR" in its overall strategic plan 2013-17, as amended by the document linking that strategic plan to its institutional policies 2016-2020 as extended and elaborated by OPLAU. This highlighting of 'strategies' includes:

- the maximisation of knowledge generation;

- the encouragement of the development of joint projects and activities; the participation in academic networks;

- to promote connectivity with students' final year and social action projects;

- to focus on issues of national priority and on national development needs;

- to focus upon research publications to enhance UCR's national, regional and international profile;

- to focus upon entrepreneurship and innovation, again in the context of national needs.

All of these 'strategies' are under the umbrella of a strategic objective of integrating research with teaching and social action and of strengthening and improving UCR's relationship with Costa Rican society.

The team learnt of progress at institutional level towards some of these 'strategies', such as improved levels of publications, including publications in mainstream journals and improved grant funding, for example from the European Union, per member of academic staff. An institutional level analysis of journal ranking had been carried out and a points system had been introduced to reward staff who were successful in achieving publication. UCR was claimed to be the main academic publishing house in Costa Rica and UCR carried out 60% of published research in Central America and the Caribbean region.

Senior staff described a 20-year journey from comparative research inactivity as being a significant national and regional player and attributed this in part to the significant recent capital investment in capital infrastructure, both buildings and equipment, by UCR. For example, UCR had successfully achieved accreditation by the USA Food and Drug Administration and a $4,000,000 investment had led to the establishment of the National Materials Laboratory. Senior staff also claimed that UCR was meeting its brief to address national needs by an increased concentration on research impact. They also drew attention to the investment in academic staff in terms of developing young academic staff and allowing them to study for higher degrees abroad and subsequently rewarding them with tenure.

Senior staff acknowledged that UCR's journey was not yet complete. For example, they described work in train to improve UCR's approach to patents which they found to be difficult and costly. The Office of the Vice-President (Research) has developed a formula for sharing patent revenue between the institution and the researcher and is working with employers "to tune up" related regulations and processes and to develop best practice guidance.

The SER states that "Programs, projects and support research activities may be developed individually or collectively as part of the key research actions of academic units, research academic units and special research units. All research units are allowed to coordinate their activities among each other or with other national, foreign, public or private institutions….". Indeed, UCR has both research centres and research institutes within its organisational structure. The Vice-President (Research) saw little practical difference between those entities, other than that research institutes report to faculties and research centres to the Vice-President (Research).

Overseen by the Vice-President (Research), UCR seeks to prevent any duplication and to prompt inter-disciplinary collaboration with the aim of engaging faculties and schools and achieving critical mass. In effect UCR operates a matrix arrangement whereby research institutes and centres are equipped and resourced to support research and invited academic staff to join them. Teaching is conducted by academic staff in a school and research is carried out by academic staff in a research centre or institute. For example, the School of Physics has five research centres and no research in the school, whereas schools without research centres could carry out research in schools. However, academic staff remains dependent upon their school's approval to carry out research in either place.

Even though institutional level investment in research was acknowledged, the view from school and faculty level was less convincing, whether the research was carried out in school or through a research centre or institute. Although there is some incentive to engage in research so as to meet promotion criteria, secure resources for additional staffing or equipment, or to earn an additional salary, not all academic staff necessarily engage in this. Academic staff in the area of arts and letters felt especially disadvantaged in that their form of research does not readily calibrate with UCR's promotion criteria. The Vice-President (Research) recognised this inequality and that the criteria do not currently accord sufficient weight to team-based research in whatever disciplinary area, a potentially inhibiting factor for interdisciplinary research.

The team saw differences in different faculties' "buy in" to the considered and duly approved institutional level research approach with their research activities, demonstrating a certain disconnection from that institutional approach which anyway allowed a high level of local discretion and did not identify priority areas. Whilst UCR had had significant successes, for example in securing research partnerships and projects, these successes were unequally distributed, which was probably not unconnected to that approach.

UCR advised that the norm was that all academic staff, no matter how research active, should teach. However, at the time of the site visits about 250 staff were exceptionally exempted on the basis of research or coordination of different UCR activities. "Practitioner" lecturers were said to have less time to do so than tenured lecturers; and academic staff who were satisfied with their status, or who had already achieved full professorship, were under no direct obligation to do so. UCR did not set individual staff financial targets on research income. Although there were some small institutional calls for pump priming funds, schools often needed to attract external investment and so consequently targeted more applied research.

There did not appear to the team to be a standard UCR mechanism for the internal evaluation of research units and of individuals' outputs. The quality assurance of research was chiefly based at local rather than institutional level and the weighting of certain evaluative criteria was not transparent. Some of the academic staff whom the team met, whilst welcoming the incentivisation of research publications, felt the points system undervalued co-authorship and thus inhibited interdisciplinary research. They also criticised data collection for the points system as being over-bureaucratic. There is no central support for writing research bids. Again, local expertise and experience iss applied. Schools tend to use their own professional networks, academic staff connections or student exchange arrangements to find suitable external institutional partners for joint research bids. The schools reported that the process for obtaining research support for such basic activity as conference attendance was over-bureaucratic and slow and that research enjoyed minimal administrative support with mundane administrative tasks falling to the academic staff themselves.

This unequal distribution of research successes could in part be addressed by reviewing how, and at what level, research is evaluated internally. At the same time the criteria for the evaluation of research publications could be reviewed so as to reduce bureaucracy (for example in relation to verification of co-authorship), take account of and therefore target journals of higher ranking, include research impact, and assist in the setting of appropriate individual targets for research income generation. This could all be supplemented by the provision of additional and more efficient administrative support for research. However, many of the research-active academic staff whom the team met, whilst recognising the systemic factors above, offered the view that researchers did not feel sufficiently supported and valued, and that the variability in workload balancing hindered research activity in many academic units (see Governance and institutional decision-making section above).

Research at UCR's *Sedes* is far less developed with few doctoral students, minimal budget, little support from main campus-based administrative research functions, and less specialist equipment and facilities. *Sede* staff who are research active (a proportion of 20% of all their academic staff was quoted to the team) tend to carry out this research in collaboration with main campus-based tenured staff and are usually internally rather than externally funded.

The team learnt that the majority of the relatively small number of doctoral students are funded through external project monies. Whilst the team understands UCR's approach to the development of young academic staff by allowing them to study for higher degrees abroad

and then rewarding them with tenure, the team sees clear scope for UCR to support, through grants and scholarships, the in-house recruitment and development of doctoral students. This would include those being prepared for recruitment as academic staff, thus reducing the emphasis on their recruitment and development at foreign universities and working towards a critical mass in key research areas.

Doctoral students could obtain scholarships in exchange for working 10 hours a week on 'co-ordination' but this was seen by the research supervisors whom the team met as a poor substitute for time off from the externally funded projects on which they were retained to dedicate to their own doctoral research studies. As such, there is no culture in UCR of doctoral students teaching.

Staff saw research as an important factor in enhancing teaching as well as an opportunity to develop the next generation of students in research methods. They cited as an example the requirements for a Masters' thesis with its blend of teaching and research. UCR views research and teaching as inextricably linked and so all professorial level academic staff have to do both and are only exceptionally permitted to only work on their research. The Vice-President (Research) feared that research-only posts would have a detrimental impact on the full range of academic staff who might see their opportunities to carry out research significantly reduced.

Students valued the opportunities UCR had given them in some instances to join research projects, publish in peer-reviewed electronic journals, and attend academic conferences. Support for such opportunities, in terms of time and funding, was however reported by academic staff to be varied across UCR. They also advised that in the later stages of their undergraduate study programmes they carry out internships, perhaps in research laboratories, where they would be paid and obtain a tuition fee waiver. Additionally, this work could be used in the context of their undergraduate thesis.

The team recommends that the university:

Ensure that research activity in all units is aligned with UCR's overall strategic objectives.

Ensure the equitable recognition and reward of research teamwork and different forms of research.

Review how, when, and at what level, research is evaluated internally and at the same time review the criteria for the evaluation and reward of research outputs.

Create a fund for the sponsorship of full-time doctoral students and post-docs to support research and improve critical mass at UCR.

6. Service to society

One of the salient and distinctive features of UCR (see University of Costa Rica profile section above) is the parity of esteem in which UCR's three key activities of research, teaching and social action (service to society) are held and the way in which UCR has been firmly embedded in the national context and engaged in the dynamics of the country's political and economic development. UCR explained that, at its best, this parity allows the symbiotic development of different activities. An example cited in the SER was UCR's work in the area of toxicology where highly rated research into snake venom had resulted in a commercial production facility for antidotes, and had influenced the curriculum of both undergraduate and postgraduate study programmes, offered students the chance to engage in research activities, and improved the quality of life of the Costa Rican population where previously the incidence of death from snake bites had been higher than that from breast cancer.

In its meetings with senior staff and its visit to the *Turrialba* campus, the team heard other similar examples. UCR has a particular focus on vulcanology as Costa Rica was a highly seismic country. This influenced not only research and study programmes in natural sciences but also research and study programmes in areas such as architecture and construction, influencing building design throughout the country to the general benefit of the entire population. UCR sees itself as discharging a national role in agriculture, partly through inter-institutional cooperation with other universities, focusing its research and designing its study programmes so that Costa Rican farmers are better positioned, through technological enhancements and working methods, to compete with multinational companies' production in lower labour cost, neighbouring competitor countries. At *Turrialba*, research into the indigenous language, *Cabecar*, goes hand-in-hand with new study programmes in *Cabecar* and social action aimed at improving the disadvantaged position of the *Cabecar* ethnic group.

Despite this proud record of engagement with, and beneficial impact on Costa Rican society, which ostensibly should be a strength of UCR, senior staff were concerned that recent adverse media attention had prompted a questioning of whether the national expenditure in higher education, and UCR in particular, offered value for money. UCR operates its own television station, radio station and national newspaper, not only to promote itself and its image but also to disseminate information and potential educational opportunities to the wider population. Nevertheless, the team identifies a need for work, at the strategic level, towards the better promotion of the university's social action to both central government and the wider community so that there is clearer understanding of not only its stand-alone value, but also of its symbiotic relationship with the university's teaching and research. This strengthening of its institutional level external communications would at the same time complement and support the efforts of faculties and schools to promote their activities.

Throughout its meetings with UCR staff and students the team was able to confirm that social action was ubiquitous in UCR and with full "buy in" from both constituencies. The team heard of over 200 social action projects such as opening up educational opportunities to indigenous

populations; empowering women; providing special IT schools for learner users; technical courses for SMEs; pre-school and primary school programmes; or education for those over 55 years of age. Social action has a particular focus in, and is indeed part of, the rationale for the existence of *Sedes* and *Recintos*.

All UCR undergraduate students must carry out 300 hours of community work, coordinated with lecturers. The students the team met generally welcomed this responsibility, seeing it as helpful in both their educational (especially in the acquisition of problem-solving skills) and personal development, as well as often offering them the chance to work on a cross-disciplinary basis with students from other study programmes. If students are unable to find a suitable social action project, they can design their own and propose it to UCR for funding.

The team met a small number of representatives from both the public and private sectors of UCR's external stakeholders. They were all broadly supportive of UCR, although not entirely uncritical. They saw UCR as having a key national role, in the context of the small size of the country and its relatively limited industrial and commercial infrastructure, in promoting innovation. UCR was however viewed as slightly bureaucratic and slow in the transferring of knowledge and innovation and in need to focus more on applied research and real-life solutions. The challenge facing UCR, when working jointly with private companies, was seen as moving at a speed which matches that of the market in terms of flexibility and adaptability.

Contrary to the concerns expressed to the team by UCR senior staff, the representatives the from central government ministries believed communication with UCR was good and that UCR's beneficial impact on the Costa Rican economy and general society was well recognised, citing examples of UCR involvement in major projects funded jointly with foreign governments. UCR's leading role in both medical education, training, technological development and actual delivery of services was fully acknowledged and seen as of a higher standard than that of competitors in private universities.

UCR was seen by the representatives from the central government ministries as a bridge with potential investment by multinational companies, offering demonstrable local human capital and expertise. Senior UCR staff had however advised the team that it was unrealistic to look for significant commercial or industrial investment from Costa Rica's small and primarily service-based economy. The team does see scope for UCR to make greater efforts to engage external stakeholders in active financial support of UCR activities, particularly research, not least to secure more diversification of its income. Further, UCR was viewed by the representatives from the central government ministries as well experienced in securing international collaborations with foreign universities and in a position to be an example of good practice to the whole national higher education sector in that regard. UCR was also viewed as having a strong alumni network allowing contact with the Costa Rican diaspora. It was seen as having a major influence on the Costa Rican cultural scene, for example in cinema, where its alumni were prominent, its study programmes having run for over 20 years. In brief, UCR had led the professionalisation of the cinema sector and had been a significant factor in securing finance for over 50 projects through the Iberoamerican Cinema Programme.

The representatives of UCR's external stakeholders valued the quality of its professional training, especially in areas such as medicine. However, they saw UCR as still having much to do in developing online and lifelong learning provision. There was some doubt expressed whether UCR had the facilities and expertise to work as a partner with private companies in highly advanced manufacturing, but an alternative model might be for it to form collaborative relationships with certain foreign and better resourced partner universities.

There was recognition of UCR's extensive service to public entities, with UCR's schools seen as the "go to" partner and expert adviser of first choice in such fields as quality assurance and certification. Similarly, there was recognition of UCR's leading role in research, especially compared with private universities which were seen as less prepared to invest in research activity.

The Ministry of Science and Technology developed a national strategic plan for a new science park, with UCR as potentially a key player. However, the constitutional safeguards on UCR's autonomy require that partnership to be based on suggestion and acceptance rather than requirement. UCR has been involved at the formative stage in the national strategic plan and there is a good working relationship with the ministry. The ministry sees the subsequent generation by UCR of UCR research funding linked to the science park as an example of the benefit of UCR aligning with national priorities.

The team heard about two UCR-level platforms aimed at putting academic staff and researchers in contact with commissioning partners AUGE and PROINNOVA. AUGE was also described as being useful to put local commissioning organisations into contact with students for placements and employment opportunities. AUGE was said to have captured up to 300 projects including incubator projects but the team heard that take-up by students was limited and take-up by individual schools was variable. Engagement with external employer partners appeared to the team to be very much a school level activity with the breadth and depth of contact dependent on the individual school's proactivity. Several schools reported close engagement with external employer partners on such activities as providing topics for final year student social action projects and professional practice opportunities. Several schools also advised that practitioners from external employer partners were invited in as guest lecturers and as advisers on relevant employment opportunities. Other schools spoke of receiving problem-solving and developmental commissions from external employer partners.

The team recommends that the university:

Work at the highest level towards the better promotion of the university's social action so that there is clearer understanding of not just its stand-alone value, but also of its symbiotic relationship with the university's teaching and research.

Engage external stakeholders in active financial support of UCR activities, particularly research, not least to secure a more diversified income.

7. Internationalisation

UCR formally articulates its internationalisation policy as to "promote networking and the creation of national and international co-operation agreements based on pertinence, solidarity, mutual respect and reciprocity in terms of co-operation to strengthen the key activities at the UCR; and strengthen international mobility for teachers, administrative staff and students to guarantee more equity and balance among academic areas and UCR's campuses." In discussion with the President and senior staff the team learnt that UCR is deeply committed to internationalisation and that increasingly this meant focus on South East Asia, China and South Korea. UCR already has had for some time a strong link with Japan in such areas as electronic microscopy. UCR was also influential in the Latin American and Caribbean regions, with the President currently also being President of the Union of Latin American Universities (UDUAL) for the period 2016-2019.

UCR demonstrates significant successes in internationalisation from its over 350 international agreements of different depth and scope, from staff and student exchange agreements to a long-standing agreement with the University of Kansas, USA, which included joint programmes and UCR staff undertaking doctoral studies in Kansas. UCR has invested increasing amounts in the development of academic staff to go abroad and achieve higher degrees and indeed this activity formed a key part of its approach to staff recruitment, retention and promotion. Spain, USA, Germany, France and the United Kingdom are amongst the destinations it supports. The benefits from this investment are not only the individual development of academic staff but also the potential enrichment of UCR in terms of the availability of an international perspective across all its activities.

UCR also has numerous reciprocals, as opposed to developmental staff exchanges. Its status and ranking are such that it can attract staff exchanges from high ranked institutions. The team was advised that UCR attempted to ensure such exchanges built upon on-going good relationships and were productive in such areas as joint research projects. UCR aims to increase visits from foreign academic staff (international lecturers) but most often, to the disappointment of the students whom the team met, this was for occasional conference attendance rather than delivery of lectures in the classroom.

UCR has been successful in project grants from the European Union, including Horizon 2020 and the Seventh Framework Programme, and is part of the Jean Monnet Latin American Network on European Studies. UCR has also successfully achieved significant external funding from Germany, for such initiatives as International Chairs for Research and Teaching, and from East Asia and especially Korea.

UCR funds three types of outgoing student exchanges: cultural experience groups, such as choirs, travelling to Latin and Central American countries; about 70 students in vulnerable financial situations wishing to attend activities abroad receive a $2,000 bursary for travelling to such countries as Chile, Mexico and South Korea; and exchanges in the context of international agencies and cooperation agreements such as those with the University of

Kansas and the University of Buenos Aires. Senior staff reported a significant increase in such activity over the last five years. Undergraduate students whom the team met who had experienced an outgoing student exchange reported helpful support throughout the process, and undergraduate students recognised the coordinated support offered to them by a dedicated international office (OAICE). This provides initial promotion of opportunities, including attendance at student congresses and similar activities, discretionary financial support, and recognition of their study abroad by an Advisory Committee of Deans convened once a month by the Vice-President (Academic Affairs). UCR also allows international internships to count towards qualification for professional practice.

UCR acknowledged that the number of incoming student exchanges is relatively low. Although Costa Rica is an attractive venue, travel there involve an expensive and long journey. Nevertheless, UCR attracts some European students, especially from Germany, and from other continents through its collaborative links such as with the University of Singapore. However, attendance is mostly for summer schools and the Spanish language. In addition, due to Costa Rica's reputation as a safe haven from political turmoil in Central and Latin America, it attracts Spanish-speaking students from families residing in Costa Rica, having fled from countries in economic or political turmoil such as Nicaragua and Venezuela. However, these students are treated as home students for such purposes as scholarships and tuition fees. Nevertheless, overall, the students whom the team met reported that their relations with international staff and students were welcome but quite limited.

UCR also acknowledged that it currently offers few study programmes in English although senior staff expressed their hope that, even if not able to deliver entire study programmes, there would at least be some modules delivered in English in most study programmes. This increase in English language teaching would however need to be accompanied by greater staff and student uptake of, preferably certified, English language provision. The benefits of this increase and consequent uptake would not just be in relation to the particular study programmes and modules but would see greater opportunities for research publication and research partnerships facilitated for staff and improved student employability, as well as improving UCR's attractiveness to incoming student exchanges. Finally, UCR's general international profile, including its visibility to potential incoming student exchanges, would also be significantly raised if the university website was fully available in both the Spanish and English languages.

The team recommends that the university:

Secure a higher level of delivery in modules and study programmes by international lecturers.

Increase the level of delivery of modules and study programmes in the English language.

Increase the staff uptake of, preferably certified, English language training.

Ensure the university website is available in both the Spanish and English languages.

8. Conclusion

UCR is a significant and major player in Costa Rica's political, social, cultural and economic life and a large, successful university which is highly regarded nationally, regionally and internationally. Its state-inspired vision and mission influence its approach, especially in relation to the parity of teaching and learning, research and social action.

Overall the IEP evaluation team is convinced that UCR is a well-managed and resourced university whose staff feel proud to be part of, and which the students value and appreciate, in particular its academic staff. The external stakeholders whom the team met, such as employers and institutions, were supportive and keen to be engaged with the university.

This report sets out UCR's overall context and working practices but with a particular emphasis on areas where UCR may wish to consider possible changes. In its self-evaluation report UCR saw its "slow capacity for change" as a weakness. UCR is highly and precisely regulated through its Organic Statute, which is the keystone of its autonomy. UCR may wish to consider how it might act upon the report's recommendations, made in relation to its future development and strategic direction. UCR will wish to consider how it might address those recommendations within the context of its Organic Statute and supporting documentation, retaining the clarity of defined remits and responsibilities within that Organic Statute and supporting documentation, but nevertheless acting creatively to facilitate change.

Summary of the recommendations

Ensure that its core values are more clearly defined, articulated and communicated to all staff and students so that they are recognisable by the university community.

Promote a culture which embraces and develops creative change, for example, identify and foster beneficial change through pilot projects and the identification of change agents.

Ensure the application of the latest strategic planning approaches, for example, the full use of key performance indicators (KPIs) and benchmarking.

Ensure the meaningful use of terminology is applied throughout the full strategic planning process.

Eliminate any unnecessary bureaucracy and promote a more user-oriented approach.

Ensure more reflective and self-critical thinking on achievements to enhance capacity for change.

Consider an advisory mechanism, with both external and internal input, to assist UCR strategically to generate and to manage the initial development of new ideas and innovation and also to strengthen UCR's reputation nationally and its visibility internationally.

Consider teaching experience and proficiency as important criteria in the recruitment and promotion of academic staff.

Continue the systemisation of the current range of diverse, and somewhat fragmented, quality mechanisms within the university.

Continue the efforts better to integrate its different sources of management information.

Increase awareness of UCR policies and protocols which underpin its commitment to equality and diversity across the whole UCR community, for example, those relating to sexual harassment or gender discrimination.

Reappraise the questions asked in the student evaluative questionnaires, consulting both expert instructional designers and students themselves, so as to focus upon facets of key importance.

Ensure student questionnaires are consistently applied and consolidated to maximise the measurement of student satisfaction across UCR.

Ensure feedback to students on the analysis of student questionnaires and actions taken.

Promote the development of more interdisciplinary study programmes and ensure the removal of any structural, bureaucratic or cultural inhibitors.

Set faculty level targets for the accreditation of study programmes.

Ensure institutional and faculty level comparison of student achievement across study programmes and especially across campuses delivering the same study programmes.

Set an institutional standard for teaching excellence and reward achievement.

Ensure up-to-date staff development for all faculties in the further development of innovative teaching methodologies and across all study programmes.

Establish communities of good teaching practice, such as teaching forums, to allow peer exchange of innovative teaching methodologies.

From the base of the current pilot of competence-based learning, introduce learning outcomes across all study programmes and deliver staff training in their design and assessment.

Mandate the CEA to promote the standardisation of assessment rubrics and assessment processes across undergraduate (and preferably postgraduate) study programmes so that these are equitable for all students.

Review the better integration with local academic units of the provision of careers and employability support.

Ensure that research activity in all units is aligned with UCR's overall strategic objectives.

Ensure the equitable recognition and reward of research teamwork and different forms of research.

Review how, when, and at what level, research is evaluated internally and at the same time review the criteria for the evaluation and reward of research outputs.

Create a fund for the sponsorship of full-time doctoral students and post-docs to support research and improve critical mass at UCR.

Work at the highest level towards the better promotion of the university's social action so that there is clearer understanding of not just its stand-alone value, but also of its symbiotic relationship with the university's teaching and research.

Engage external stakeholders in active financial support of UCR activities, particularly research, not least to secure a more diversified income.

Secure a higher level of delivery in modules and study programmes by international lecturers.

Increase the level of delivery of modules and study programmes in the English language.

Increase the staff uptake of, preferably certified, English language training.

Ensure the university website is available in both the Spanish and English languages.