

Education system

# Costa Rica

described and compared with  
the Dutch system

This document contains information on the education system of Costa Rica. We explain the Dutch equivalent of the most common qualifications from Costa Rica for the purpose of admission to Dutch higher education.

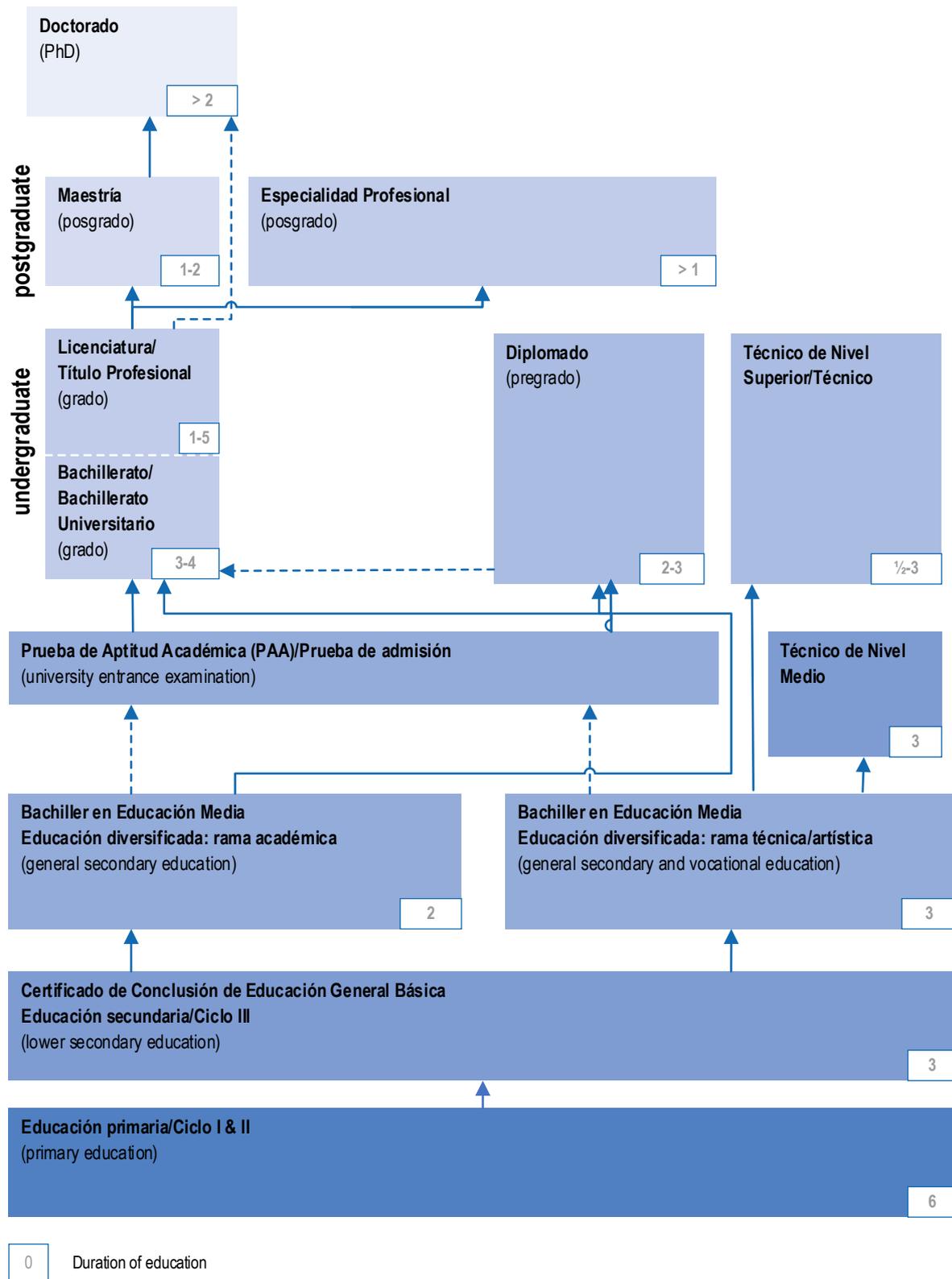
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## Education system Costa Rica



## Evaluation chart

The left-hand column in the table below lists the most common foreign qualifications. The other columns show the Dutch equivalent along with the corresponding levels in the Dutch and European qualifications frameworks.

Degree or qualification	Dutch equivalent and NLQF level	EQF level
<i>Técnico de Nivel Medio</i>	<a href="#">MBO</a> diploma qualification level 2, 3 or 4	2-4
<i>Bachiller en Educación Media (rama académica)</i>	<a href="#">HAVO</a> diploma	4
<i>Bachillerato (4 years)</i>	<a href="#">HBO</a> bachelor's degree or 2 years of WO	6
<i>Licenciatura</i>	<a href="#">HBO</a> or <a href="#">WO</a> bachelor's degree	6
<i>Maestría</i>	<a href="#">HBO</a> or <a href="#">WO</a> master's degree	7

NB

- The information provided in the table is a general recommendation from which no rights may be derived.
- NLQF = Dutch Qualifications Framework. EQF = European Qualifications Framework.
- The EQF/[NLQF level](#) is not so much a reflection of study load or content; rather, it is an indication of a person's knowledge and skills after having completed a certain programme of study.
- Information about Dutch equivalent qualifications can be found on our website: [education and diplomas the Netherlands](#).
- [The Cooperation Organisation for Vocational Education, Training and the Labour Market \(SBB\)](#), evaluates statements on foreign qualifications and training at VMBO and MBO level. The evaluation may vary if SBB evaluates the diploma for admission to VET schools or the labour market in the Netherlands.

## ■ Introduction

**Costa Rica (*República de Costa Rica*) is a presidential republic in Central America. It consists of 7 provinces with 81 cantons, which are further subdivided into 473 districts.**

### **Form of government**

Costa Rica is a parliamentary democracy, with a president as head of state. The population is represented by the parliament, which consists of 57 representatives.

### **Education**

The Ministry of Public Education (*Ministerio de Educación Pública*) is the body responsible for primary, secondary and higher education, and sets the basic curriculum for primary and secondary education.

Education policy is spread out among 3 *Consejos*:

- The *Consejo de Educación Superior* (CES)
  - responsible for primary and secondary education policy; and
  - grants approval to para-university institutions (*instituciones parauniversitarias*) to offer programmes and issue diplomas.
- The *Consejo Nacional de Rectores* (CONARE)
  - responsible for state-run institutions and programme policy
- The *Consejo Nacional de Enseñanza Superior Universitaria Privada* (CONESUP)
  - grants approval to private institutions to offer programmes; and
  - monitors programme quality.

### **General features**

- Compulsory education: 9 years of general basic education (*Educación General Básica*), from age 7 to age 16.
- Language of instruction: Spanish.
- Academic year: January-December or February/March-December.

## ■ Primary and secondary education

Education takes place at public and private schools: *escuela*, *liceo* and *colegio*. Some schools have their own curriculum focus such as art, sport or bilingual schools (*colegio artístico*, *colegio deportivo* or *colegio bilingüe*). An overview of all schools is available on the [Ministry of Public Education](#) website.

### General basic education

Compulsory general basic education (*Educación General Básica* - EGB) lasts 9 years, and is divided into 3 stages:

- [Ciclo I](#) (*primer ciclo*)
- [Ciclo II](#) (*segundo ciclo*)
- [Ciclo III](#) (*tercer ciclo*)

#### Ciclo I and II

These two combined are often referred to as *educación primaria*. Pupils start in grade 1 at the age of 7.

- Duration: 6 years (grades 1-6), each stage takes 3 years.
- Curriculum: the curriculum includes the following subjects:
  - *artes industriales* (applied art)
  - *artes plásticas* (visual arts)
  - *ciencias, educación agrícola* (science and agriculture)
  - *educación física* (physical education)
  - *educación musical* (music education)
  - *educación religiosa* (religious education)
  - *español* (Spanish)
  - *estudios sociales y educación cívica* (social studies and civic education)
  - *laboratorio de informática* (information technology)
  - *lengua extranjeras* (foreign languages): *inglés, francés y otras* (English, French and other languages)
  - *matemática* (mathematics)

#### Ciclo III

This stage is often referred to as *educación secundaria*.

- Duration: 3 years (grades 7-9).
- Content: the curriculum builds on the subjects from the first 6 years. In addition to mathematics, schools also sometimes offer biology, physics and chemistry as separate subjects.
- Diploma: *Certificado de Conclusión de Educación General Básica*.

### Secondary education

Secondary education (*educación diversificada*) is not compulsory. Pupils can choose from:

- general secondary education focusing on academic education (*rama académica*);
- a combination of general and vocational secondary education focusing on technical or art education (*rama técnica/rama artística*).

### General secondary education

- Profile: academic pathway (*rama académica*).
- Duration: 2 years.
- Content: the curriculum always includes mathematics, Spanish, social studies, civic education and 1 or 2 foreign languages. This programme prepares pupils for the final exam, which tests knowledge in the following subjects:
  - *español* (Spanish)
  - *estudios sociales* (social studies)
  - *educación cívica* (civic education)
  - *ciencias* (chemistry, physics or biology)
  - *idioma extranjero* (foreign language)
  - *matemática* (mathematics)
- Diploma: *Bachiller en Educación Media*. This certificate grants access to higher education programmes in Costa Rica, sometimes subject to an entrance examination.

In terms of level, a *Bachiller en Educación Media (rama académica)* is comparable to a [HAVO](#) diploma.

### General and vocational secondary education

Technical education (*rama técnica*) is offered at the *Colegio Técnico Profesional*. Pupils can choose from 3 pathways:

- *comercial y servicios* (commerce and services);
- *agropecuaria* (agriculture);
- *industrial* (industry).

Various specialisations are available within each pathway. An overview of all specialisations is available on the [Ministry of Public Education](#) website.

Art education (*rama artística*) is offered by the *Colegio Técnico Artístico*. Pupils can choose from various specialisations, including music, dance or theatre.

### Educación técnica (*rama técnica/artística*)

- Duration: 3 years.
- Outcome: entry to the labour market.
- Diploma: *Técnico de Nivel Medio*, plus the specialisation. This certificate does **not** grant access to the higher education system in Costa Rica.

In terms of level, a *Técnico de Nivel Medio* is comparable to an [MBO](#) diploma (qualification level 2-4), depending on the specialisation.

In addition to vocational education (which grants the *Técnico de Nivel Medio* qualification), pupils can also take general subjects.

- Duration: 1-3 years.
- Content: although the curriculum can vary between schools, pupils who take general subjects can sit the final exam that is also offered at the end of general secondary education. If they pass, in addition to their *Técnico de Nivel Medio* students will also receive a *Bachiller en Educación Media* for their chosen vocational pathway (*rama técnica/rama artística*).
- Diploma: *Bachiller en Educación Media*. This certificate **does** grant access to higher education programmes in Costa Rica, sometimes subject to an entrance examination.

## ■ Higher education

Unlike the Netherlands, Costa Rica does not have a binary education system. Higher education institutions offer study programmes containing elements of both professional education and academic programmes.

Higher education is provided by public institutions, private institutions and para-university institutions:

- Public institutions: programmes at these institutions are automatically accredited.
- Private institutions require approval from the *Consejo Nacional de Enseñanza Superior Universitaria Privada* (CONESUP) before offering a programme.
- Para-university institutions require approval from the *Consejo de Educación Superior* in order to offer programmes.

In total, there are 84 higher-education institutions in Costa Rica:

- 5 public institutions
- 54 private institutions
- 25 para-university institutions

At the public institutions, higher education is divided into 3 cycles:

- *Primer nivel* (first level):  
*pregrado (Diplomado)*
- *Segundo nivel* (second level):  
*grado (Bachillerato en Licenciatura)*
- *Tercer nivel* (third level):  
*posgrado (Especialidad profesional, maestría en doctorado académico)*

Costa Rica also has a number of international institutions:

- *Universidad EARTH/EARTH University*
- *Centro Agronómico Tropical de Investigación y Enseñanza (CATIE)/ Tropical Agricultural Research and Higher Education Center (CATIE)*
- *Universidad para la PAZ/University for Peace*

These international institutions are not officially part of the Costa Rican education system, but have received statutory permission to offer programmes in Costa Rica. Quality assurance for these programmes is provided by the *Sistema Nacional de Acreditación de Educación Superior* (SINAES).

## ■ Admission to higher education

Admission to higher education requires a secondary school qualification: *Bachiller en Educación Media*. Some institutions may also set a grade average or entrance examination as a prerequisite. For example:

- a general entrance examination (*prueba de admisión*); or
- an academic aptitude test (*Prueba de Aptitud Académica, PAA*).

## ■ University and higher professional education

Universities and other higher education institutions offer both academic and professional programmes.

### **Técnico or Técnico Superior**

Higher education institutions provide technical and administrative professional programmes in fields such as finance and mechanical engineering.

- Duration: several weeks (less than 1,000 hours) or ½-3 years.
  - Content: short modules, sometimes supplemented with practical subjects.
  - Admission requirement: usually a secondary school diploma (*Bachiller en Educación Media*).
- Diploma: *Técnico* or *Técnico Superior*.

Both of these provide direct access to the labour market. The evaluation of these certificates may vary according to the type and duration of the programme.

### **First cycle**

*Diplomado* programmes fall under the first cycle, which includes the professional programmes.

### **Diplomado**

- Duration: 2-3 years, ranging between 60 and 96 [credits](#).
  - Content: variable curriculum including compulsory subjects, usually concludes with a work placement.
  - Admission requirement: *Bachiller en Educación Media*, and occasionally an entrance examination.
- Diploma: *Diplomado* + specialisation.

The evaluation of these programmes may vary according to the type and duration of the programme.

### **Second cycle**

The second cycle includes the *Bachillerato* and *Licenciatura* programmes, which can be either academic or professional in nature. Programmes are available in all specialisations, including art, psychology or teacher training.

**Bachillerato**

- Duration: usually at least 4 years (ranging between 120 and 144 [credits](#)). Technical and medical programmes are often longer.
- Content: variable curriculum including a number of compulsory subjects and electives, but no final thesis. At least 150 hours of social service, *trabajo comunal universitario* (TCU).
- Admission requirement: *Bachiller en Educación Media*, and sometimes an entrance examination.
- Diploma: *Bachillerato/Bachillerato Universitario* + specialisation or professional qualification, e.g. *Administrador de Empresas* or *Ingeniero*.

In terms of level, a 4-year *Bachillerato/Bachillerato Universitario* is comparable to an [HBO](#) bachelor's degree or 2 years of university education ([WO](#)), depending on the type of programme.

**Licenciatura**

- Duration: 5 years (ranging between 150 and 180 [credits](#)) or 1 year (ranging between 30 and 36 credits) if the programme is a continuation of the *Bachillerato/Bachillerato Universitario*.
- Content: variable curriculum including a number of compulsory subjects and electives, concluding with a final project or thesis.
- Admission requirement: *Bachiller en Educación Media* (sometimes an entrance examination for 5-year programmes) and a *Bachillerato (Universitario)* for 1-year programmes.
- Diploma: *Licenciatura* + specialisation.

In terms of level, a *Licenciatura* is comparable to an [HBO](#) or [WO](#) bachelor's degree, depending on the type of programme.

**Third cycle**

The following are third cycle programmes:

- *Especialidad Profesional*
- *Maestría*
- *Doctorado*

***Especialidad Profesional***

- Duration: at least 1 year.
- Content: variable curriculum including at least 1,620 hours of practical instruction, concluding with a practical exam/project (*prueba práctica de graduación*).

- Admission requirement: *Licenciatura* in a related field.
- Diploma: *Especialidad* + specialisation.

The evaluation of these programmes may vary according to the type and duration of the programme.

### **Maestría**

- Duration: 1-2 years. Public institutions: at least 2 years, ranging between 60 and 72 [credits](#).
- Content: public institutions run 2 types of programmes:
  - The *Maestría académica* focuses on research; the curriculum can vary from student to student, but includes at least 30 credits' worth of research and concludes with a research project (*trabajo de tesis*) or final thesis (*tesis de posgrado*) that the student must defend.
  - The *Maestría profesional* focuses on applied research; the curriculum is variable and includes electives, final reports and a final presentation.
- Admission requirements: at least a *Bachillerato/Bachillerato Universitario* and sometimes an entrance examination, additional prerequisite subjects (*cursos de nivelación*) in the relevant field, plus knowledge of a foreign language (usually English).
- Diploma: *Maestría* + specialisation.

In terms of level, a *Maestría* is comparable to an [HBO](#) or [WO](#) master's degree, depending on the type of programme.

### **Doctorado**

- Duration: at least 2 years (ranging between 50 and 70 [credits](#)).
- Content: coursework, research, writing and defence of a dissertation (*trabajo de tesis*). Compulsory:
  - publication of 2 articles in well-known journals;
  - proficiency in at least 2 foreign languages.
- Admission requirement: *Maestría*, but depending on prior education and research experience, in exceptional cases students may be admitted with a *Bachillerato* or *Licenciatura*.
- Diploma: *Doctorado* + specialisation.

## ■ Assessment systems

### Secondary education

Secondary education (*educación diversificado*) schools generally employ a numbered scale from 1-100, with a grade of 70 being the lowest satisfactory grade.

### Higher education

Various grading systems are used by higher education institutions.

- On a scale of 0-10, 7 is the lowest satisfactory grade.
- On a scale of 0-100, 70 is the lowest satisfactory grade (this may vary between universities, however).

Often an explanation of the grading system is given at the bottom of the list of marks, which will also explain the structure of the academic year, e.g.: three 15-week trimesters (*trimestres*) or 4 quarters (*cuatrimestres*) spread across the entire year.

Some common abbreviations:

Abbreviation	Definition
A	<i>Aprobado</i> (pass)
P	<i>Perdido</i> (fail)
S	<i>Satisfactorio</i> (satisfactory)
C	<i>Cursado</i> (attended)
I/IN/INC	<i>Incompleto</i> (incomplete)
CNV	<i>Convalidado</i> (equivalent to)
NSP	<i>No se presentó</i> (absent)
REC	<i>Reconocido</i> (recognised)
REP	<i>Reprobado</i> (fail)
RPA	<i>Reprobado por ausencias</i> (failed due to absence)
RJ	<i>Retiro justificado</i> (not completed, with good reason)
RI	<i>Retiro justificado</i> (not completed, without good reason)

At public institutions, 1 credit represents 3 hours per week, or 45 hours per trimester. This may vary at private institutions.

## ■ Qualification frameworks

The Ministry of Public Education, the *Consejo Centroamericana de Acreditación de la Educación Superior* (CCA) and the 5 public institutions all participate in project HICA: Harmonisation and Innovation in Central America Higher Education. The project aims to develop a regional qualifications framework for higher education in Central America: the *Marco de Cualificaciones para la Educación Superior Centroamericana* (MCESCA).

More information is available on the [CONARE](#) and [European Union](#) websites.

## ■ Quality assurance and accreditation

In Costa Rica, the [Sistema Nacional de Acreditación de la Educación Superior \(SINAES\)](#) is responsible for the quality of higher education programmes. Institutions can have their programmes voluntarily accredited by SINAES. Accreditations are valid for no more than 8 years.

Programmes at private and para-university institutions require accreditation, falling under the responsibility of the [Consejo Nacional de Enseñanza Superior Universitaria Privada \(CONESUP\)](#) and [Consejo de Educación Superior \(CSE\)](#).

## ■ International treaties

Costa Rica has international diploma-recognition agreements with Chile and Mexico.

## ■ Composition of file

A complete file for secondary and higher education includes the diploma and the corresponding grade list (*certificación*).

## ■ Overview of higher education institutions

### Public institutions

- [Universidad de Costa Rica \(UCR\)](#)
- [Tecnológico de Costa Rica \(TEC\)](#)
- [Universidad Nacional \(UNA\)](#)
- [Universidad Estatal a Distancia \(UNED\)](#)
- [Universidad Técnica Nacional \(UTN\)](#)

### Private institutions

The [CONESUP website](#) gives an overview of all private institutions and accredited programmes.

### Para-university institutions

The [Consejo de Educación Superior \(CSE\) website](#) with an overview of all para-university institutions and accredited programmes.

### ■ Useful links

All the listed website are only available in Spanish:

- [Ministerio de Educación Pública \(MEP\)](#), Ministry of Public Education, including information about education, including an [overview of all schools](#) in Costa Rica.
- [Consejo Nacional de Rectores \(CONARE\)](#), including information about the public institutions.
- [Consejo Nacional de Educación Superior \(CONESUP\)](#), including information about the private institutions.
- [Consejo de Educación Superior \(CES\)](#), including information about primary and secondary education, and about the para-university institutions, and with [acts and decisions](#) in the field of education, plus the most recent curricula in primary and secondary education.
- [Sistema Nacional de Acreditación de la Educación Superior \(SINAES\)](#), the national organisation for accreditation in higher education.