Introduction

The National University of Costa Rica (UNA) is committed to putting the principles of the Earth Charter into practice in its campus policies and administration, its academic activities, and its extension projects. The UNA has more than eleven years of experience using and promoting the Earth Charter to instil within students and professors a sense of belonging within the broader global community, and a sense of responsibility for present and future generations. The UNA is also actively involved in supporting educational initiatives under the framework of the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development.
Environmental policy and management plan

The Sustainable Campus Programme is one of the key action areas of the National University of Costa Rica’s environmental policy, established in 2003. The central objective of the Programme is to implement an integrated and sustainable system for waste disposal, resource water treatment and energy conservation at the University. This Programme operates through the involvement of students, professors and administrative staff in a range of activities aimed at minimizing environmental degradation on campus.

In 2007, two specific projects were launched as part of the Programme: The Participatory Management Plan, for improving solid waste disposal, and the Action Plan, for minimizing and safely handling the disposal of dangerous and toxic materials. Faculty members from the schools of Environmental Science and Chemistry have been in charge of spearheading these two projects.

Another initiative of the Sustainable Campus Programme has been the construction of a residual water treatment plant. These are almost nonexistent in Costa Rica due to high infrastructure costs. Nevertheless, the University applied for a loan in order to carry out the construction of the water treatment station – a testament to the commitment of university officials to put into practice the principles of sustainability.

Academic courses at the Centre for General Studies, UNA

The National University of Costa Rica offers a range of courses that incorporate the Earth Charter into the curriculum. However, the Centre for General Studies is particularly active in delivering course content aimed at analyzing the principles and the diverse dimensions of sustainability in the present-day context through an ethical perspective.

Every year, approximately 3,000 first-year students enrol in courses offered by the Centre, in such subjects as art, science and technology, social sciences, philosophy and the humanities. The courses are characterized by a strong humanist vision, and in particular, emphasize the importance of building a sustainable and ecologically harmonious earth community.

Many of the courses offered by the Centre have developed innovative theoretical and practical approaches and use the Earth Charter as a general framework and ethical reference. Some of the courses incorporating the Earth Charter include:

- Environmental ethics
- Values, the environment and sustainability of life
- Socio-ecological vulnerability and risk management in Costa Rica
- Artistic expression and the environment
- Culture of peace
- Health and the environment
- Theatre, humanism and society
- Science, humanism, the environment and sustainability of life
- Sustainable livelihoods
- Natural resources, culture and sustainability

Extension projects

The National University of Costa Rica operates approximately 256 extension projects, some of which have drawn upon the Earth Charter as a key reference point. One such project in conservation has been carried out over the past four years by Professor Mayela Cascante, Dean of the Centre for General Studies, in collaboration with several professors of the Centre, in the region of Bolsón de Santa Cruz de Guanacaste. This region is seeking to preserve and promote local culture and ecological integrity despite a massive surge in tourism. To contribute to this aim, the University coordinators have drafted a document outlining a set of ethics, based on the Earth Charter, to underlie and sustain the project.

Another interesting extension project was undertaken by the acting Vice-Rector of Extension Projects, Elizabeth Ramírez. She developed educational programmes designed to empower members of rural communities living in Río Cuarto de Grecia and Costa de Pájaros, Puntarenas, who had been negatively affected by the
environmental impacts of nearby development initiatives. The University’s extension project drew on the principles of the Earth Charter to raise the consciousness and confidence levels of the local communities, and to examine economic alternatives that might help to alleviate their poverty.

Methodological aspects ~ the Centre for General Studies courses

The National University of Costa Rica grants its faculty members the freedom to select the content and methodologies of the courses they teach. As a result, a wide range of practices has emerged among teaching staff about how to incorporate Earth Charter principles and the notion of sustainability into the academic curriculum. The following descriptions are a sampling of those approaches used by UNA faculty.

Incorporating ethics and values into academic content

The Centre for General Studies offers a variety of courses incorporating an ethical dimension to the analysis of sustainable development issues. This is an innovative pedagogical approach, as it encourages students to reflect on the concrete impact of societal values on the path of development, technological advances and environmental crises in the modern-day context. For example, the course “Values, environment and sustainability” seeks to “promote values that enable students to convince and commit themselves to actions geared towards the recovery, conservation and protection of the environment in Costa Rica and on planet Earth.” According to Professor Heidy Vega, it is important to incorporate ethics into foundation courses in order to instil within students a sense of respect and responsibility - values that every human being should practice in his/her relationship with society, and in particular with nature and future generations.

According to Professor Flor Salas, the integration of values and ethics into course content has helped to foster a greater awareness amongst first-year students about environmental and social problems, at national and global levels. And, in her course entitled “Natural resources, culture and sustainability,” Professor Nancy Sánchez utilizes participatory methodologies, such as projects with local communities, to develop within her students a sense of environmental responsibility and commitment. The main lesson is that finding solutions to modern-day environmental crises requires changing our ways of thinking, as well as promoting the values of solidarity, respect and collaboration. In this way, each person can begin to make a personal contribution to solving collective problems.

Developing participatory processes conducive to knowledge creation

For the vast majority of professors at the Centre for General Studies, it is crucial that education go beyond the transmission of knowledge and memorization; learning should entail processes in which the student is directly engaged and involved. An open and trusting learning environment generally facilitates student participation in class discussions, especially in situations where it is clear that all points of view are respected and valued.

Promoting respect towards elders

Sustainability begins when the intergenerational process is no longer viewed as a rupture, but as continuity. This premise is taken seriously by several professors at the Centre for General Studies, who require their students to develop and offer workshops, short courses and other innovative activities for senior citizens. In addition, elders are invited to prepare educational initiatives for young people. For example, in the course “Environment and Health,” Professor Geraldy Peña examines the historical involvement of our elders in the management of natural resources for food production. She incorporates personal narratives and biographical anecdotes of senior citizens, and encourages students to relate those experiences to their present-day context.
Providing practical experiences to promote the internalization of ‘sustainability’

Various courses offered by the Centre for General Studies feature a fieldwork component where students and local community members participate in the organization and execution of an event, project or activity. In Professor Francisco San Lee Campos’ courses, for instance, he promotes “…learning activities that have an impact within the university campus and in local communities.” Some initiatives undertaken in his courses to realize the principles of the Earth Charter include: campaigning for recycling, reforestation and energy conservation; protesting against specific cases of environmental degradation; promoting eco-friendly products and causes; raising awareness about dengue fever; and developing eco-art and eco-murals.

Professor Edwin Cedeño also uses art as a means of raising awareness of sustainable development issues. He encourages students along with rural inhabitants of various fieldwork sites, to enact skits and theatrical productions relating to situations of personal and community significance. Such interaction with indigenous communities has also become an important way to re-connect students with values of spirituality and communion with nature.

Participating in service and research in local communities

There is a general consensus among the faculty of the Centre that one of the most effective means of transmitting and implementing the Earth Charter principles is to encourage real-life engagement between students and local community members. Many of the Centre’s courses include methodologies that require analyses of the environmental, social and economic problems faced by local communities, drawing upon the Earth Charter as a framework for action.

Linking coursework with the Centre’s extension projects

The Centre for General Studies has expressed a particular interest in involving students in its extension projects. This is an effective means of educating the student population, and, by extension, disseminating knowledge among their peers. The project mentioned earlier, carried out by Professor Mayela Cascante in the district of Bolsón, Guanacaste, is a case in point. In this project, students actively contribute to a range of activities related to the health and preservation of the history, culture, and environment of the region. Several professors in the Centre for General Studies are also involved in the wider community by sharing their knowledge, expertise and experiences outside the UNA sphere, through lectures and workshops held at off-campus educational centres, community development associations, and urban municipalities.

In order to generate public interest in waste management over the past three years, the Centre for General Studies, in collaboration with the Schools of Geography and Environmental Science, has been organizing a waste disposal campaign every October in the central district of Heredia.

UNA CEG student working with kindergarten children.
Using the Earth Charter as a methodological tool

The course “Vulnerability, society and environment” draws on the Earth Charter to explore the existing relationship between socio-ecological vulnerability and risk management. As such, the objectives are to critically examine and raise awareness of key problems that threaten the sustainability of different regions across Costa Rica, while adopting a holistic perspective.

In the course “A culture of peace,” ongoing references are made to the Earth Charter in discussing a range of social, economic and environmental issues. Course participants have also visited schools in remote areas to gauge the living situation of children from less privileged backgrounds.

Example of a group activity using the Earth Charter ~
Professor Francisco San Lee Campos, UNA

Steps:
1. Form groups to discuss the mission and vision that we might have as human beings belonging to a community, an institution and/or the broader web of life.
2. Ask each group to identify three main problems that need to be urgently addressed in order to fulfill this mission and vision.
3. Invite the participants to write down the values that might guide them to realize their mission and vision.
4. Ask each group to consider the question, “What are the actions required to accomplish the mission, and who might help to facilitate the action plan?”
5. All of the above should be discussed in groups and common positions should be identified.
6. Distribute the Earth Charter to the participants and ask them to determine which values that they identified relate directly or indirectly to the Charter and its principles.

In courses such as “Environmental ethics,” “Values, environment and sustainability of life” and “Natural resources and sustainability,” the Earth Charter constitutes the main reference point for analyzing current social and environmental challenges on the local, national and global level. According to Professor Geraldy Peña, the Earth Charter has helped her to approach environmental topics from a more holistic perspective. For example, in one of her courses entitled “Health and the environment,” the Charter has served as a key starting point for reflecting, analyzing and discussing this interdisciplinary topic, particularly as it relates to quality of life.

Professor Flor Salas begins her course on environmental ethics by providing a general historical overview of the Earth Charter, and by focusing on its Preamble. Students are then asked to engage in a more indepth reading of the Earth Charter, to select a text related to the document, and to answer the following questions:

- What do you think about the text that you have just read, and how does it relate to the environmental and social problems in your country?
- How does the text relate to the Earth Charter?
- Prior to this class, did you know about the Earth Charter?
- What might be the ‘added-value potential’ of the Earth Charter in your community?

Lessons Learned

According to Professor Heidy Vega, the participatory methodologies adopted and promoted by the Centre for General Studies have paved the way for more fulfilling and rewarding learning experiences. Students are encouraged to become actors in their own learning process, to explore their potential, and to develop their creativity. This model goes beyond the traditional conception of education, in which the teacher is viewed as the sole generator of knowledge. Through participatory research methods and fieldwork carried out
in local communities, students develop the skills required to independently identify research problems and propose potential solutions to those problems.

Practical activities are generally considered central to enhancing the teaching-learning process. It is also recommended that students develop their own research problems from relevant research settings. Although professors can serve as a guide and facilitator during the process, they should never impose ways of thinking on their students.

According to Professor Geraldy Peña, working with the Earth Charter also enables the use of theory in order to more effectively engage with our surroundings. More specifically, students can use the Charter as a tool to express their different perspectives, raise consciousness within and among peers, and put their ideals into practice through an innovative and participatory approach. It is important to note that in general, on the basis of the University’s experiences, those students coming into contact with the Earth Charter have become more conscious, critical and objective, as the Charter serves as a channel for reflection on modern issues from a holistic and interdisciplinary perspective.

At the same time, in addition to incorporating the Earth Charter in campus policies, courses, and projects, another key mission of UNA is to realize the principle of sustainability in various aspects of campus life. The previously mentioned Sustainable Campus Programme has been specifically designed to achieve this aim.

Institutional efforts to minimize the discrepancy between academic theories taught in classes and the policy-making realities of the University Administration have helped clarify and change the attitudes and culture of the university community.

As noted, the National University of Costa Rica has used the Earth Charter as a theoretical framework in extension projects and selected courses, particularly in the Centre for General Studies. Some of the professors from the Centre have recognized the potential use of the Charter to undertake a holistic and contextual analysis of our global and local realities. The Earth Charter has been such a useful framework for many courses that the Centre for General Studies decided to design a course specifically about the Charter. During the semester-long duration of the course, students are invited to carry out an indepth reflection of the document and put its principles into practice.

Experiential learning activities have also been promoted as part of the self-learning process in the Centre’s courses. The transformative effect of learning through real-life experiences and reflecting on values and ethics can be seen through the concrete actions of students, such as the significant number of those enrolled in participatory courses or undertaking fieldwork who have already become (or are planning to be involved) in community service in their community, workplace, or study institution.

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Reforestation project done by CEG students in Puerto Jesus-Guanacaste.