REPORT OF THE WSCUC TEAM
SPECIAL VISIT

To Universidad de Las Américas (UDLA)

April 22-24, 2019

Team Roster
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The team evaluated the institution under the 2013 Standards of Accreditation and prepared this report containing its collective evaluation for consideration and action by the institution and by the WASC Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC). The formal action concerning the institution’s status is taken by the Commission and is described in a letter from the Commission to the institution. This report and the Commission letter are made available to the public by publication on the WSCUC website.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## SECTION I – OVERVIEW AND CONTEXT  
3

- A. Description of the Institution, its Accreditation History, as Relevant, and the Visit 3
- B. Description of Team’s Review Process 4
- C. Institution’s Special Visit Report: Quality and Rigor of the Report and Supporting Evidence 5

## SECTION II – TEAM’S EVALUATION OF ISSUES UNDER THE STANDARDS  
6

- A. Issue: Demonstrate the effectiveness of the university’s governance structure 6
- B. Issue: Evaluate the impact of the university’s support for its faculty in their pursuit of advanced degrees 8
- C. Issue: Evaluate the effectiveness of the university’s strategic plan as expressed in the UDLA 2020 documents 10

## SECTION III – OTHER TOPICS, AS APPROPRIATE  
4

## SECTION IV – FINDINGS, COMMENDATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE TEAM REVIEW  
13

## APPENDICES (if applicable)  
4

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SECTION I – OVERVIEW AND CONTEXT

A. Description of Institution, Accreditation History, as relevant, and Visit

Reaching its 25th anniversary in 2019, Universidad de Las Americas (UDLA) is established as one of Ecuador’s leading universities enrolling 17,000 students in undergraduate (associates and bachelors) and graduate (master’s) degree programs across a range of disciplines. UDLA’s mission and vision are:

Vision – The vision of the university is to create a model for Ecuadorian higher education and build a proud student community committed to the country which supports the personal and professional success of its members and is integrated with the international community.

Mission – The mission of the university is to form capable, enterprising individuals with an international perspective and a firm commitment to society, based on ethical principles and values.

UDLA’s accreditation history is complex: the institution is accredited at the institutional level by the appropriate higher education oversight agency in Ecuador—the Council for Evaluation, Accreditation, and Quality Assurance in Higher Education (CEAACES for its initials in Spanish)—and by WSCUC, which granted accreditation in 2016. UDLA is the only institution in the country with U.S. regional accreditation. 10 undergraduate programs are accredited according to the standards of the Chilean National Accreditation Commission and plans to attain discipline specific accreditations with a recognized international organization for Business Administration, International Business, and Computer and Information Systems Engineering. The institution is the largest self-financed university in Ecuador with multiple locations and an experimental farm. The university offers degrees in health sciences,
engineering, architecture and design, business, gastronomy, communication, tourism, psychology, film, law, veterinary medicine, journalism, and music.

In August 2018, Ecuador implemented major reforms of its Higher Education Law, with which UDLA must comply. These reforms have impacted the UDLA governance structure that is a focus for this Special Visit (SV). These impacts will be described and analyzed in a later section of this report.

WSCUC granted Initial Accreditation for six years to UDLA in March 2016. An Offsite Review was scheduled for fall 2021 and the Accreditation Visit for spring 2022 with a Mid-Cycle Review for spring 2019. Additionally, a Special Visit was scheduled for spring 2019 to focus on specific issues raised in the Seeking Accreditation Visit 1 report. UDLA has also submitted a range of substantive change proposals related to their graduate programs.

This Special Visit addresses the following:

- Demonstrate the effectiveness of the university’s governance structure by means of a review of its practices and their impact on the institution over time;
- Evaluate the impact of the university’s support for its faculty in their pursuit of advanced degrees in terms of the goal to preserve its distinctive academic culture;
- Evaluate the effectiveness of the university’s strategic plan as expressed in the UDLA 2020 documents.

The institution does not have off-campus locations that were part of this visit, nor was there any necessary follow-up related to substantive changes.

B. Description of Team’s Review Process

Each team member carefully reviewed the UDLA institutional Special Visit report (SVR) and supporting evidence. Included in the evidence were the institutional Strategic Plan 2015-2019, financial statements, accreditation certificates, a report on faculty research productivity, a WSCUC annual report, relevant policies and guidelines related to faculty progress in retention, tenure and promotion as well as
continued professional development and education, an Annual Rector’s Report and an Annual Institutional Assessment Report among other evidence.

Once the chair assigned topic areas to himself and the assistant chair, the team drafted analysis related to the SV areas of concern thus eliminating the team worksheet. The team chair, assistant chair and WSCUC staff liaison participated in the team conference call. The team reviewed the draft report and added clarification as needed. The team identified areas of consensus and areas of concern and agreed upon additional evidence needed prior to the visit and in the evidence room.

During the visit the team conducted interviews with individuals from UDLA. These included the Rector, members of the Advisory Board, members of the Academic Vice-Rector’s team, Operations, Finance and Planning teams, the Special Visit steering committee, University Council (internal governing board), the Research department, and faculty members. Evidence obtained during the interviews informed the team’s analysis of the SV issues.

C. Institution’s Special Report: Quality and Rigor of the Report and Supporting Evidence

The SVR was of exceptionally high quality. It was well organized, well written and directly addressed each issue related to the Special Visit. The institution provided national context as needed for the team to clearly understand the supports and constraints that impact UDLA’s work with WSCUC.

The institutional Executive Committee, the Rector’s cabinet, served as the steering committee for the Special Visit with the addition of the Accreditation Liaison Officer (ALO). The three main themes for the Special Visit were assigned to three working groups with participation of five to six members in each, including the ALO and support staff. Working groups included individuals from across the institution selected for their area of responsibility as it related to the SV issue, as well as members of the steering committee.

The institution addressed each of the identified issues through an inquiry process that included gathering evidence, careful analysis of the evidence and appropriate reflection on the findings. The
institution’s process provided a comprehensive assessment of the progress made and continued challenges in each SV issue. The conclusions align with the evidence and the institution maintained a critical lens on the supports and constraints both within and outside the institution that impact each SV issue.

SECTION II – EVALUATION OF ISSUES UNDER THE STANDARDS

A. **Issue: Demonstrate the effectiveness of the university’s governance structure by means of a review of its practices and their impact on the institution over time;**

   The team reviewed the SVR, the 2018 reform to the Higher Education Law (LOES for its Spanish acronym), UDLA bylaws, UDLA’s organizational structure, and the Institutional Evaluation Policy for Universities and Polytechnic Schools in the Higher Education Quality Assurance System. The team considered interview evidence as well.

   The SVR notes that context is important in understanding how governance at UDLA works and has evolved over time. Ecuadorian institutions of higher education are bound by a national law approved in 2010. The LOES created a series of Councils with various responsibilities related to institutions of higher education (IHE’s) in Ecuador such as accreditation, quality assurance, oversight for science, technology and innovation, among other responsibilities. The LOES also mandated that all institutions restructure their bylaws and adopt a governance structure that made the ultimate decision-making and governing body of each institution an exclusively internal body. Furthermore, that institutional governing body (órgano colegiado académico superior [highest collegiate organ of academic government]), must include representatives of the faculty, administration, students, alumni and staff. This requirement does not align with WSCUC expectations of an independent governing board (CFR 3.6, 3.7, 3.9).

   Given this lawful requirement, UDLA designated its Consejo Superior or Higher Council according to the LOES definition and expectations. Based on its desire to remain aligned with WSCUC
expectations related to governance, the institution created an external Advisory Board in 2015 “in order to assign it some of the crucial roles of independent oversight that WSCUC expects.” The Advisory Board is external and independent as a consulting and advisory board. The institution reports that the board has effectively exercised its role since 2015 with an established committee structure, and with separate meetings and agendas. Furthermore, the Advisory Board connects to the institution by including members from the Higher Council on all standing committees of UDLA’s Higher Council.

A reform to the LOES approved in 2018 changed this requirement. Private institutions are now afforded a measure of autonomy, including in governance matters. While the reform preserves the Higher Council as part of university governance, an independent governing board such as a Board of Regents is now also allowed. UDLA revised its bylaws to align with the LOES 2018 reform. The Higher Council was renamed to the University Council. Furthermore, the new bylaws establish the new structure and powers of the Board of Regents. The authority of the Board of Regents aligns with WSCUC expectations of an independent governing board (CFR 3.6, 3.7, 3.9).

On the critical matter of selection and evaluation of the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), the LOES allows for three alternatives for structuring decision-making. The third option—which is the one most compatible with WSCUC Standards—was reportedly included in the law at UDLA’s suggestion, and is the option that UDLA’s University Council has unanimously endorsed and incorporated in UDLA’s bylaws (https://wascsenior.box.com/s/aymrt5jksi6q8wkhbjpvgdy4567zj1vf) (CFR 3.6, 3.7, 3.9). The option adopted from the LOES reads as follows in translation (clarifications added in square brackets):

*The Board of Regents will present in consultation a list of three candidates to the Higher Council, with which it must pronounce itself in agreement. If the Higher Council is not in agreement with the list, the Council of Regents must replace them with a new [acceptable] list of three candidates, from which the Board of Regents [then] chooses the rector and vice-chancellor or vice chancellor.*

UDLA has deferred the creation of the new Board of Regents until after the Special Visit, since our charge was to review the effectiveness of the current governance structure. The evidence reviewed
and interviews during the SV confirmed that UDLA has effectively utilized the University Council and Advisory Board to advance the institution’s mission and strategic goals. The roles and responsibilities for each body are clearly described and understood by members. The University Council membership included members of the UDLA community who articulated a commitment to the institutional shared governance model and a deep understanding of their authority and relationship to the Advisory Board. The Advisory Board members included notable individuals who reflect a broad spectrum of Ecuadorian society and sectors. These individuals evidenced the same degree of understanding regarding their role and authority. Furthermore, each group affirmed a cooperative and collaborative relationship with each other in service to the institution and student success (CFR 3.6, 3.7, 3.9).

While the institution has yet to name and seat the Board of Regents, the team believes that the current success in developing and sustaining a cooperative relationship between the existing University Council and Advisory Board bodes well for the institution’s future success in establishing the independent Board of Regents. The team has every expectation that the institution will effectively operationalize the Board of Regents aligned with the institution’s mission and WSCUC expectations.

B. **Issue: Evaluate the impact of the university’s support for its faculty in their pursuit of advanced degrees in terms of the goal to preserve its distinctive academic culture;**

The team reviewed the SVR, the 2018 reform to LOES, and the Policy for Support for Doctoral Programs. The team considered interviews provided by the Rector, members of the Academic Vice-Rector’s team, research faculty, and faculty in general.

In the SVR, the institution addressed this issue from a comprehensive perspective and reported on the institution’s efforts to improve academic qualifications including growth in the number of faculty with advanced degrees, professional development efforts in assessment and pedagogy, as well as the development of a scholarly research culture. UDLA approached this issue holistically with serious
thought, intention, and action. The institution reports this issue has been of “greatest importance and also the most challenging for UDLA,” (CFR 2.8, 2.9, 3.1, 3.3).

UDLA reports that as of fall 2018, 86% of both full- and part-time faculty held at least a Master of Arts (MA) degree, and 10% (118) of the faculty held Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degrees. Of the full-time faculty, 15% (90) hold PhDs. UDLA reports this figure is double the number reported in 2015 (46, or 7.5%). In the SVR, the institution describes the institutional efforts to support faculty attaining advanced degrees as well as the challenges they face.

The institution’s intentional efforts and transparent campaign to hire and develop faculty with advanced degrees has had the most success among MA degree completion as reported in the SVR (820 in 2015 to 985 in 2018). The institution continues to support faculty to attain an MA at a minimum and has reduced the number of faculty hired without an MA degree except in those fields of study or institutional instructional roles (such as technical teachers in language labs or music instruction) where professional experience can be the equivalent of an MA (CFR 2.8, 2.9, 3.1, 3.3).

The challenges in hiring faculty with doctorates and supporting faculty in earning a doctorate are numerous. The national context has shown there is a very limited pool of doctoral candidates available, thus creating a highly competitive recruitment environment among Ecuadoran institutions of higher education. UDLA supports current MA faculty to attain their doctorates while it continues efforts to recruit and retain doctoral faculty both from within and outside Ecuador.

The institution has a policy and significant support system that offers candidates paid leave and reduced teaching loads. The institution also provides academic assistance in terms of writing support groups and research mentors among the more experienced faculty. The institution requires candidates to carefully select their doctoral programs and to commit to working at UDLA for a period of time after they earn their doctorates. This support system has resulted in 11 faculty earning a doctorate since
2015. An additional 67 candidates are enrolled in doctoral programs and steadily progressing toward completing their degrees in 2019 or 2020 (CFR 2.8, 2.9, 3.1, 3.3).

The team confirmed the effectiveness of this support system through interviews. Indeed, faculty reported they would not have attained their degrees without the support provided by UDLA. Some faculty reported they will defend their doctoral dissertations at prestigious international institutions within the next few months. These faculty were grateful for the support and enthusiastically described their experiences and resulting professional development.

Furthermore, interviews revealed the faculty are committed to developing, supporting and sustaining a vibrant scholarly research culture that integrates student research experiences so that the overall Ecuadoran research environment and culture is expanded. Faculty are eager to engage in both lab and community-based research that is multidisciplinary, focused on addressing important issues facing Ecuador, and that involves both MA and doctoral faculty. Faculty are committed to including students in their research projects, disseminating results and sharing publication authorship with students (CFR 2.8, 2.9, 3.1, 3.3).

UDLA administrators and faculty are aware of the challenges they face in attracting and retaining doctoral faculty as well in building a scholarly research culture. Indeed, they report there are some areas of research that are not possible in Ecuador because of a lack of appropriate lab facilities and/or technological support. Nonetheless, it is clear to the team the institution is committed to sustaining a rigorous research environment to advance new knowledge and support student success.

C. Issue: Evaluate the effectiveness of the university’s strategic plan as expressed in the UDLA 2020 documents.

The team reviewed the SVR, including the current university strategic plan, UDLA 2020, and appropriate appendices. The team considered interviews provided by the Rector, UDLA’s Advisory
Board, governing board (University Council), the operations, finance and planning teams, and members of the Academic Vice-rector’s team.

The team found UDLA’s 2015-2019 strategic plan to be thoroughly researched, well organized, and sophisticated in its approach. The plan includes an analysis of the economic, social, demographic, and political environment and its trends. It positions the university strategically vis-à-vis the latter. It includes a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis and articulates five major strategic objectives for the institution. A number of strategies are identified to achieve each objective. For each strategy, the action steps, the responsible university administrative unit, and a timeline for implementation are specified as part of a multi-annual operating plan. A Gantt chart summarizes the overall timelines for the operating plan. The process for developing the plan involved extensive consultation with all stakeholders (CFR 4.5, 4.6).

Within the framework of the multi-annual operating plan that is intended to accomplish the strategic plan’s objectives, each of the administrative units develop their annual operating budget requests, which are then rolled up into the institution’s annual budget. However, the plan itself does not include specific metrics to be used in assessing success of the implementation steps, strategies, and ultimately objectives. The SVR does report the relative degree of success for each of the five objectives by means of an ingenious pentagon chart (information is concise and easy to quickly digest). However, it is not clear how the percentage of success for each objective was calculated. Notwithstanding this observation, UDLA has gone most of the way toward a complete linkage of its strategic plan with resource allocation decisions, since the units’ budgets are developed in the context of their accepted responsibility for each of the fine-grained implementation steps associated with the strategies that support each objective (CFR 4.2, 4.6, 4.7).

UDLA’s Big Data initiative may allow it to fully identify and track metrics associated with each of its strategic objectives in the next cycle of strategic planning. Over the past three years, UDLA has placed an
emphasis on information intelligence, the cornerstone of this effort being the formation of an Information Intelligence Department. The department provides an institutional research function focused on academic data combined with business analytics related to operations and administration of the university. The department is grounded in a “big data” model that has reduced data processing times while institutionalizing a centralized data warehouse.

Closely related to the strategic plan, we found UDLA’s financial planning methodology extremely sophisticated, based on multiple scenarios reflecting institutional mission and ranked priorities that would allow UDLA to sustain itself in all but the most catastrophic conditions. The CFO provided an example of scenarios anticipating four different student enrollment patterns. The university began the fiscal year following a budget based on one scenario. When enrollment did not meet that scenario’s targets, the university quickly shifted to a different budget scenario with enrollment projections aligned with actual results (CFR 4.2, 4.2, 4.6, 4.7).

In conclusion, the team found that UDLA’s strategic planning process and plan have been effective in guiding the institution in its resource allocation decisions, has been developed collaboratively and in support of its mission, and has been flexible enough in its implementation to allow the institution to respond nimbly to changing conditions (CFR 4.6, 4.7).
SECTION IV – FINDINGS, COMMENDATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

COMMENDATIONS

• UDLA demonstrated serious commitment to the WSCUC accreditation process, including addressing the three issues identified by the Commission for this Special Visit.

• The institution embodies a strong student-centered organizational culture, which drives its processes and priorities.

• UDLA very effectively used the constrained structure mandated by the previous higher education law to nevertheless meet the objectives of the WSCUC governance policy.

• The institution exercised national leadership by contributing to the improvement of Ecuadorian higher education policy and legislation.

• UDLA has made a substantial resource commitment to faculty research and professional development, and continues to explore ways to improve the effectiveness of its support efforts.

• UDLA 2020 has been an effective guide to the development of the institution’s operational plans and resource allocation through its annual budgets.

RECOMMENDATIONS

• Clearly and promptly establish the roles and responsibilities of the University Council, the Board of Regents, and the Advisory Board in the new governance structure (CFR 3.9).

• Build a body of evidence that clearly demonstrates the effectiveness of the new governance structure (CFR 3.9).

• Expand a culture of collaborative research across disciplines and among PhD and Master-level faculty (CFR 2.8, 2.9, 3.3).

• Leverage the big data/business intelligence asset to further tighten the linkage of strategic objectives to resource allocation in the next cycle of strategic planning (CFR 4.1, 4.2, 4.6, 4.7).