

Cuba and the Link between Education and Social Transformation

Jesús M. García del Portal

Jesús M. García del Portal is senior professor of the UNESCO Chair on Management and Teaching of the Center of Studies for Improvement Higher Education at the University of Havana, Cuba. CEPES-Universidad de La Habana, Calle 23 N° 453 entre H e I. Vedado. C.P. 10400, La Habana. CUBA. E-mail: <portal@cepes.uh.cu>.

This article offers some reflections on Cuban higher education and attempts to present the key features of the educational system, especially with regard to the link between education and social transformation.

Post-1959

As early as 1962, the reform of higher education had become the most significant development for Cuban universities until the mid-1970s. The reform identified the main steps to be taken, anticipating short- and medium-term developments and warning of initial and future contradictions and difficulties. The reform would serve as a guide for successive transformations.

The changes to the system went beyond the simple massification of school and university services but were a radical transformation, involving the very concept of education and its link with social transformation. Among the many contradictions and difficulties created simultaneously by such a major undertaking were those involving the students, almost all of whom were first-generation university attenders; designing a new curriculum; training a new cadre of professors; diversifying academic institutions and their location; opening up opportunities to the entire student population, to both young and adult students; linking training with the needs of the labor market; and guaranteeing the employment of graduates by the state.

The last four decades have witnessed a change in the disciplinary distribution of university enrollments. While in the late 1960s the technical, pedagogical, and medical fields led in enrollments, pedagogy later moved to first place. More recently, the humanities have started to see increased enrollments. In the future, the humanities will likely experience a boom—just as the pedagogical and medical fields did at earlier periods—as part

of a national movement to improve the cultural attainment of people throughout the country.

Current Developments

Higher education in Cuba is going through a period of qualitative development, as well as a decentralization process. The trend is for academic institutions to become centers in which research work will be the foremost substantive function. A network of research centers is being extended all over the country to equalize provinces with the large urban areas where the oldest centers are found. Those centers are under the auspices of various government offices, so that education is not just the responsibility of the ministries of education. The fact that the privilege of scientific activity does not lie within the education arena alone has helped to promote aggressive development in such areas as medicine, genetics engineering, and biotechnology. Still, this does not imply that research is given higher priority than teaching and education. Research will be integrated into postgraduate studies.

Higher education in Cuba will continue to be involved with university extension activities, in which students and faculty work in communities to ensure that academic professionals are still part of economic development at the ground level. The bulk of the country's scientific potential is in the universities.

Problems and Perspectives

If academic excellence is to be attained, fundamental requirements would be reexamining the undergraduate curriculum and developing postgraduate programs and scientific research activity—inspired by a willingness to do everything better and a conviction that this is possible as part of a process of ongoing academic self-evaluation and adaptation. Beyond the support the universities have given to the social transformation of the Cuban project, a higher stage of academic achievement must be attained in three fundamental areas: student access; the missions of teaching, research, and service; and governance.

Nevertheless, the foundations of the Cuban educational model: public, free, and secular education and the professional, ideological, and cultural level of our graduates are indications of the success of the Cuban educational enterprise. The results of some studies on the professional performance of graduates and progress in the productive and service sectors, along with certain scientific developments, support the position that Cuba has a highly qualified and valuable labor and cultural potential.

