

## **PEDAGOGY 2021**

**Conference by Dr. José Ramón Saborido Loidi, Minister of Higher Education**

**Title: “The Cuban University Community Confronts the COVID-19 Pandemic. Current Challenges”**

Dr. Ena Elsa Velázquez Cobiella, Minister of Education;

Ministers, Rectors and officials honoring us with their presence;

Teachers, professors and educators who participate in this Pedagogy 2021 Congress;

Colleagues and friends;

The Ministry of Education’s decision to continue holding this prestigious and eagerly awaited international forum for sharing reflections and experiences, focused on cooperation to improve the quality of education, has been very appropriate. The theme of this Congress, “A Meeting for the Unity of All Educators” is very much relevant to the purpose of designing common strategies for the benefit of our peoples while coping together with the economic crisis aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Holding this Congress in a virtual format does not mean that its significance has in any way been played down. Quite on the contrary, this Congress conveys a clear message of modernity and scientific approach, for it is being held using advanced technological instruments. This communication platform has unquestionable benefits, given its widespread use and clear future projection. We use this tool of proven effectiveness on a daily basis.

It is secret to no one that the crisis catalyzed by the pandemic has pushed the classic educational programs and modalities off balance, particularly the possibilities to implement them. So, in the face of this adverse situation, solidarity among peoples is the only way forward.

Universal balance has disappeared. Today, planet Earth has tested positive. It was not asymptomatic. Symptoms were being perceived for some time now. But many were not able to realize that and in quite a few cases, silence, indifference and shortsightedness have prevailed. Its colophon was swift to appear. A pandemic has emerged among us. Its quick spread around the world has continued to aggravate the general neoliberal systemic crisis in all sectors.

We are faced with an unheard-of situation in our times. Therefore, the dialogue and experiences that we may share would be most useful and timely. The pandemic has caused alarming and increasing mortality rates. The risk of infection is real. The promising vaccines have not reached the majorities and the economic crisis has expanded, which means, among other things, that financial reserves have been truly damaged. Being realistic, we foresee that these conditions will not change in the short term.

With the emergence of the new coronavirus our everyday life has radically changed. It has undergone an unexpected change due to the real and enormous risk posed by the SARS-COV-2 virus, since we are all haunted by the permanent uncertainty of a possible infection. However, we are sure that the pandemic has strengthened the values that have distinguished our guild, such as solidarity, love for our fellow men and women, which is also the love for the entire humanity; sacrifice and dedication which have always characterized the work by teachers and professors.

Thus, in the face of this complex and troubling reality, rather than speculating about what may happen from now on, we must focus on the scientific and conscientious development of the academic and organizational adaptations that would mitigate the negative consequences generated by the present crisis.

In Cuba, when it comes to education, there are two invariable principles we have necessarily and imperiously stuck to:

- a. Achieve the highest possible quality levels in professional training to the extent that present circumstances allow.
- b. Consolidate what we have achieved at the highest possible level, which is the development of self-learning skill; the use of new technologies, television and other learning resources; the creation of

broader spaces and opportunities for independent activities by promoting greater activism by the entire educational community in the training and knowledge building processes.

Where did we start from to achieve all that we have attained? Obviously, we started from our own experience as professors in the classrooms; and also from the analysis and study of different sources of information which, in the case of Cuba, means the support and supervision of decision-making processes in educational centers. Cuban science, which has been largely generated in our higher education Institutions, has been placed at the service of our nation like never before, following the appeal launched by our President who has encouraged us to ‘think as a nation.’

We have also taken as a starting point the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals; the Guidelines for the Economic and Social Policy of Our Government; the strategic objectives identified by the Ministry of Higher Education and the scientific production of the country’s higher education institutions.

So, what resources do we count on to confront, reverse and overcome this serious situation? We count on the scientifically based political will and government support promoted by the President of the Republic, accompanied by the people, something that is shown day after day in our continued struggle against the COVID-19 pandemic. In the case of higher education, we count on thousands of officials, professors, teachers, researchers and students, who courageously volunteered to confront the disease, sometimes at the risk of their own lives, and have carried out numerous tasks, thus setting an example for all of us. They are no doubt a major strength to meet the new challenges. We count on the results and successful experiences derived from the implementation of innovative teaching modalities that were applied first to get around the pandemic and later, with greater knowledge, to secure the highest possible quality levels. Sharing those experiences is, in its own right, reason enough to hold this event. We count on the international relations forged after decades of joint work which, in many cases, have led to the creation of solid friendship bonds, being aware that, as José Martí said in 1892, “...*friendship is sure cure for all sorrows...*”

The reality we have lived through in recent months compelled us to introduce certain curriculum adaptations that tend to erase the dividing line

that separates full-time attendance from part-time attendance. We have been forced to be flexible with times, spaces and regulations. We have corroborated the need to make a greater use of far more productive methods and develop skills for independent activities and research. Such adaptations are based on the essential premises established in the recently adopted curricula in relation to:

- The conception of life-long learning
- The increasing trend to develop learning methods in different situations, spaces and times, parallel to those which take place at academic institutions, particularly those that are developed while carrying out social work in the community as well as in other different branches of the economy, depending on the professional profile of every specialty.
- The increasing personalization of learning, taking into account the existence of several self-learning modalities; and paying greater attention to individual differences, which made it possible for training to be ever more inclusive and autonomous and to permanently encourage the achievement of higher levels of cognitive independence, networks connections or learning communities.

To be able to meet this great challenge it has been necessary and urgent to:

- Take into account diversity: population, individual and cultural differences, among others.
- Make training spaces and times more flexible, following the principle that the University also exists beyond its walls.
- Adopt an approach that moves from a teaching-centered didactic to a learning-centered didactic.

For these reasons we have had to introduce a series of academic and organizational adaptations that have led to:

- The adjustment of academic schedules with the corresponding modification of the general time available; the change of semesters with periods; and the change of higher education entrance examination dates.
- A change from the full-time attendance modality to the part-time attendance modality in day-time courses, with a more intensive use of ICTs, the self-management of knowledge as well as independent and research activities.
- The analysis of curricula by the National University Specialties Committees in order to introduce the appropriate adaptations, with greater focus on essential aspects in a more flexible way, which has allowed us to move certain contents and even subjects from one period or academic course into another
- A reconsideration of the current evaluation methods, giving greater importance to comprehensive exams following a more interdisciplinary approach.
- The adoption of new modalities for university studies completion exercises.

The results obtained so far have been really positive. Thanks to the responsible and committed participation of the entire university community, we were able to introduce the methodological adjustments that have led to changes in the final evaluation, the transfer of objectives, contents and/or subjects to the following academic year. We have also carried out a hard work to locate and communicate with each and every student to promote an effective exchange with them.

It is necessary to emphasize the consolidation of EVEA (Teaching and Learning Virtual Platform) and the fact that 80 per cent of closing subjects, including the exams for the training of the self-management of the learning process, has been digitalized. Special attention has been given to the re-design of in-job training activities and job pre-assignment for students who complete their studies in the center where they carry out their pre-professional practice. All of this is in tune with the objectives that we

intended to achieve, adapted to the epidemiological situation facing every territory and the country in general.

Our higher education institutions have risen to the challenge imposed by the struggle against the pandemic and have contributed to the decisions taken by municipal and provincial governments, as well as those adopted at the national level.

We are very proud of the wonderful response given by our students, professors, researchers and workers to the call of the Revolution to directly engage in this transcendental battle to stop and defeat the pandemic. All universities made their health centers and under graduate and postgraduate residences available to accommodate ill patients as well as those suspected to be ill. Many of these facilities have been turned into isolation centers for quarantine surveillance; thousands of students and professors have worked in the screening and follow up of patients, volunteering to put own lives at risk, which is a clear expression of the fraternal values forged by the example and ideas of the historic leader of the Cuban Revolution. They have been working endless hours, visiting each and every family home throughout the entire country; helping to deliver foodstuffs at no cost and, what is most important, offering fraternal encouragement to those in need. They have worked in labs; they have contributed to enforce sanitary discipline in public transportation and have been presence in all areas requiring their support. As I said at the beginning, this battle has strengthened the altruistic, fraternal and patriotic values of the university community. Today we are better persons than we were before.

And it couldn't be otherwise. The cardinal objective that has guided the Cuban revolutionary higher education has been to train high level, competent professionals, committed to their socialist homeland. Our historical traditions in defense of sovereignty, fighting first against colonialism and later, up until today, against the Yankee imperialism, demand the formation of cultured and comprehensively trained professionals who are characterized by their deep humane and internationalist feelings. We keep on working on that, amidst an ever more globalized world. So we need to get much more acquainted with the main international trends in higher education and equip ourselves with the most genuine anti-colonial and anti-hegemonic values.

Day after day, the Cuban people bear witness to the full and tireless dedication of professors, researchers and students, engaged in this battle against the pandemic that is also being headed by the President of the Republic, who are applying the scientific results achieved by our universities. Many of our schools and research centers have contributed their scientific results to struggle against SARS-COV-2. For example, the University of Havana, the Central University 'Marta Abreu' of Las Villas and the University of Information Sciences (UCI), just to mention three of them, have developed a commendable work.

The coordinated work between the government and the scientists, experts and technicians as well as the people in general, made it possible for the Cuban government to consolidate its scientific and participatory approach. There is no doubt that Cuba's struggle against COVID-19 has been successful. In order to find a solution to the most pressing needs, universities and their research centers have identified the following working principles:

- Integration, cooperation and collaboration among all actors;
- Approach to innovation as a social, interactive and systemic process that articulates all local capabilities (knowledge, experiences, resources);
- Cross-cutting approach to demographic dynamics and knowledge and innovation management;
- Preservation and rational use of natural resources and implementation of the State Plan to Address Climate Change, also known by the beautiful name of 'Task Life'.
- Emphasis on the revitalization of government- science relations, combining innovation and the closing of research-development-innovation cycles; and promoting the widespread implementation of results, for which we are working with all factors and incorporating leading producers, particularly those in the agricultural sector and those with export capabilities.

In support of the efforts made by the country to cope with the covid-19 pandemic, universities have achieved results with tangible impacts on the health, agricultural and social sectors. In this combat against the pandemic, which is right now the main focus of our work, we should emphasize the role played by biomedical modeling and data sciences, particularly the modeling of epidemic curbs, dynamic models and mobility status based on mobile phones data, artificial intelligence and public data; specific operational research and analysis of complex networks, which have documented through data and graphics the trends of the pandemic and the course of action proposed to our government.

We managed to maintain the production of SURFACEN®, a product that is currently used by several hospitals as part of the protocol followed in the treatment of COVID-19 patients suffering from respiratory disorders. This product was created by the National Agricultural Health Center (CENSA), one of the leading higher education scientific institutions founded by Fidel. This center has also validated an anti-viral product for the evaluation of the bio-molecules that are used in the treatment of COVID-19 patients.

Social sciences have also been present in this battle in many ways, namely, the advisory offered by professors and students to Popular Councils to improve the assistance to vulnerable population sectors and the organization of community services. Psychologists have helped training decision-makers and have offered specialized consultations to improve home cohabitation and the education of young children. They have also helped to coordinate virtual groups via Whatsapp and have suggested the adoption of social and economic measures, among others.

Other important results have been the widespread use of BIOBRAS 16, a bioactive stimulator that improves plant growth; the development of a new hardware for the ventilators that are manufactured in Cuba; the creation and widespread use of a virtual self-screening test, among many others. In most of the cases these new products have been manufactured and applied in coordination with leading edge companies and entities.

These are some examples of the results achieved by universities during the direct confrontation of the COVID-19 pandemic, which show that the strategy to integrate science, innovation and production developed by our country was correct, although there is still a lot of work to be done by all, including our higher education institutions.

The key elements in the struggle against COVID-19 have been the direct dialogue between experts, scholars and professionals with the Government; the promotion of inter-institutional and intersectoral cooperation; the interdisciplinary approach; the development of an intensive work to accelerate solutions and an active public communication to improve information and the behavior of the population, as was summarized by the President of the Republic himself in a recently published scientific article he wrote in collaboration with an outstanding university professor. In said article he reaffirmed that the most valuable resource of that group of scientists were the values they carried, namely, solidarity and dedication, which add up to their skills. He also said that, under the conditions as the ones that we have faced in times of the COVID-19 pandemic, those values have manifested with particular intensity<sup>1</sup>.

Esteemed colleagues:

The Trump administration, already in his death throes, strengthened the political and economic measures as well as the destabilizing and terrorist actions against the Cuban Revolution. The entire university community has rejected all these mercenary and annexationist positions and has defended, since the very beginning, the unquestionable truth that is based on the humanism, transparency and legitimacy of our socialist project 'by all and for the wellbeing of all', as was stated by the Apostle of our independence. That is the plain truth. The rest is mere propaganda, financed by the hegemonic powers. From this forum we would like to express our gratitude to those who have supported the honest and vertical position of Cuba.

The UNESCO's World Conference on Higher Education held in 2009 advocated for the shared idea that international cooperation in higher education should be based on solidarity and mutual respect, and the promotion of humanistic values and intercultural dialogue (UNESCO, 2009). Let us uphold those principles with renewed strength!

Today, humanity is facing a pandemic that has generated a health, economic and social crisis of unparalleled proportions. In order to overcome the enormous challenges imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic it is necessary to concert all efforts and resources in an ever more

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<sup>1</sup> Díaz-Canel, Núñez Jover, 2020)

interconnected world. As the President of the Republic of Cuba said, if solidarity had been as much globalized as the market, history would have been different<sup>2</sup>.

Universities from all over the world have the responsibility to be at the forefront of this humanitarian and fraternal struggle to preserve the health and wellbeing of peoples. As always, you can count on Cuba.

I take this opportunity to invite you to attend the next 'University' Congress, under the theme "University and Innovation for a Sustainable and Inclusive Development" to be held in February next year.

I wish you success in this 'Pedagogy 2021' Congress!

Thank you.

### **Bibliographic references**

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4. UNESCO. World Conference on Higher Education - 2009: the new dynamics of higher education and research for societal change and development. Paragraph 24.(UNESCO Headquarters, Paris, July 5-8,2009) [http://www.unesco.org/education/WCHE2009/comunicado\\_es.pdf](http://www.unesco.org/education/WCHE2009/comunicado_es.pdf)

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<sup>2</sup> Díaz-Canel, 2020.