

OPENING REMARKS

UNIVERSITY 2024

Title: “The Contribution of Higher Education to the Social and Economic Development of Nations: The Cuban Experience.”

Esteemed colleagues;

I am pleased to convey cordial greetings to those who are physically present as well as those who are interacting with us through the networks. Be welcomed to the Fourteenth International Congress on Higher Education “University 2024”, which has been conceived as a forum for exchange and discussion on the unquestionable commitment of our institutions to the relevance, quality and sustainability of their work in the interest of the progress of our nations in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

These are particularly relevant issues for all of us, which provide a broad context to accommodate the wide range of questions that will be discussed at the symposia, fora, panels, conferences and high authorities meetings to be convened by the Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (IESALC-UNESCO) and the Latin American and Caribbean Space for Higher Education (ENLACES) and the fourth and last preparatory meeting prior to the Regional Conference on Higher Education for Latin American and Caribbean (CRES 2018+5) plus other opportunities for exchange that will come up during these days. All of these meetings will allow us to discuss, with absolute transparency, the progress that has been achieved, but most of all, what we can do for the benefit of our peoples, educational systems, institutions and workers and students communities.

There are always several reasons that motivate the attendance to this event: sharing knowledge and experience; learning; establishing scientific and academic relations; consolidating friendly relations and discovering new ones. Besides, this has been one of the biggest, best established and most recognized higher education events since 1998.

Organizing a macro-event such as the “University” international congress is always a very challenging task. In our case, as you know, the complexities inherent to this kind of events and the vicissitudes imposed by a post-

pandemic world, which is ever more unequal and filled with conflicts, add up to the complicated and omnipresent obstacles of the unjust and cruel blockade or, better to say, the aggression and siege imposed by the government of the United States against our people.

Even under such circumstances, the Cuban higher education community has kept on working to hold a proud event with high scientific rigor so that it can become a platform for discussion, construction of alliances and search for solutions in favor of the just and sustainable development of our nations, based on the strengthening of our universities, scientific centers and other institutions in terms of social vocation and competences for the management of knowledge. This event is intended to gather new energies and innovative ideas that would encourage us to continue working for a higher education as a public and social good; a universal human right and a duty of all States.

That would be our tribute to those who are joining us, challenging blockades and threats, as well as to those who, for more than two decades, have worked so that the “University” congress becomes an international benchmark.

Esteemed colleagues;

The role universities play in the development of our countries has evolved during the last few decades. While their demands and needs are nothing new, the complex world situation, social urgencies, technological changes and the deterioration of the planet compel us to resort continuously to the scientific approach and innovation, always based on ethical, environmental and humanistic precepts.

The purpose will always be to work in favor of the most genuine interests. Comrade Frei Betto, who has always had an outstanding participation in our events, made an assertion that remains fully valid today, and I quote: *“...universities need to undergo a process of permanent self-criticism. They need to ask themselves if they are an island of knowledge, indifferent to the real needs of the country, or if they are a factory capable of providing the nation with the theoretical and practical tools necessary to solve the problems that affect them”*, end of quote (Betto, 2016, p. 3).

In the light of these well founded demands, it would almost seem obvious to emphasize that the most important and primary contribution of higher education to development lies in the training of better skilled and more comprehensive professionals. In this endeavor, suitability, social commitment and humanism must be a priority.

In order to accomplish our mission, we also require public policies that would provide greater and more equitable access to universities. Ensuring that requires all States to live up to their responsibility as guarantors of free and inclusive higher education.

The principle of “Leaving no one behind” should be implemented on a case-by-case basis. We have to pay attention to the most vulnerable sectors and reach out to all neighborhoods, all communities, each and every home and youth.

In Cuba, for more than 65 years now, we have worked and will continue to work that way. In 1972, Fidel said, and I quote: *“Now, the possibility to study is a reality. It is a prerogative of any youth. Because, if in the past, an individual had to strive hard to make it to the university or be able to pay for university studies, today it can be said that (...) society is the one that strives hard to see to it that as many youths as possible make it to the university...”*

Besides, we are far from achieving what the international society demands, which is an ever more relevant and creative use of knowledge. As we stated in the document issued by ENLACES, prior to the World Conference in Barcelona, university graduates should turn continued training into a habit that would ensure them to be *“in the position of successfully performing their duties in works that do not exist as yet; using technologies that have not been invented; solving unheard-of problems and learning how to engage in collaborative efforts in multicultural and multidisciplinary environments”* (ENLACES, 2022. p.31).

To ensure the comprehensive training of our students it is indispensable for them to engage in tasks of major economic and social impact through different types of work linked to production and services, according to their professional profile, including in-job training, participation in research projects, among others. Furthermore, community work has become indispensable in recent years, particularly after the pandemic, due to its

inherent social and innovative character and commitment. As was said by our Apostle in 1888, and I quote: *“A new education program should be adopted, starting from the elementary school and ending in a suitable and outstanding university, appropriate to the times (...) and aspirations of nations...”*

University and Social and Economic Development

The road map adopted at the World Conference on Higher Education held in Barcelona in 2022 ratified that:

“Higher Education institutions have three major social missions: producing knowledge through scientific research; educating persons in the broadest sense of the word, paying particular attention to the knowledge and skills they will need as professionals; and being socially responsible...”
(UNESCO 2022, p.21).

While we may disagree with the order of relevance of the aforementioned missions, we do agree with the essence of this analysis, in which everything concurs with the pursuance of a relevant and suitable higher education that would contribute to the creation of culture, goods and services for all. Universities do not exist for themselves. Everything they do must be in favor of our peoples and the development of humankind.

Although the strength of its roots lies in training, this should be implemented in a prospective way, oriented to the achievement of well-defined social and economic objectives. Taking this as a compass, in Cuba as well as in other countries, the university education is continuously improving its plans and programs in the interest of the social and economic development of the country and of each and every territory.

The adoption of a Government Management System Based on Science and Innovation promoted by our President, PhD Miguel Díaz-Canel Bermúdez, has turned the Cuban university and its community into the focus of attention. This governmental working system is aimed at strengthening the role of science and innovation as a permanent method in the search for creative solutions to the problems and challenges that come about during the country’s economic and social development process. As was stated by President Díaz-Canel in 2022, during the former Congress, and I quote, *“this system still demands a lot of learning by scientists,*

experts, entrepreneurs, research centers, universities and the public administration. We are learning as we go forward. But the path towards development is, beyond any doubt, our path; and universities are key in this endeavor.”

Ever since then, higher education institutions in our country have prioritized the objectives and goals that contribute the most to meet the demands of the Government Management System Based on Science and Innovation. Professors and researchers have played an outstanding role in the updating and creation of new policies and standards and the improvement of public administration, the entrepreneurial system, the work of the National Council on Innovation, the technical advisory councils, the temporary groups and other consultative bodies in the country. In addition to that, 8 of the 17 National Science, Technology and Innovation Programs are managed by Higher Education Institutions.

Ninety percent of the professors and researches who support this activity hold a PhD or an MSc degree and have also obtained more than 75 per cent of all the national awards granted by the Academy of Sciences of Cuba throughout its history. We have more than 180 scientific publications in different areas of knowledge as well as a significant production of books and software solutions. More than 70 per cent of all the articles published by the academic and scientific community of our country in mainstream journals come from higher education institutions.

A significant progress has been achieved in the joint work between universities; science, technology and innovation entities and the centers considered as strategic for the economic and social development of the country, with relevant results in the areas of food production, power generation, water resources management; social, humanistic and economic sciences; health and bio-medicine; telecommunications; the mass introduction of ICTs in the society; industry; construction; biotechnology and sustainable development, among many others.

The interaction between higher education institutions and the entities that produce goods and services is an ongoing process that is being gradually strengthened. The results that have been achieved show the potential lying in the joint work with the entrepreneurial system for the transformation of territories and our society, according to the National Economic and Social Development Program by the year 2030.

In our quest for a “*solid articulation between knowledge and the production of goods and services*”, between January of 2020 and December of 2023, two Scientific and Technological Parks have been built thanks to the decisive contribution of universities, eight Science and Technology Interface Associations, the Havana University Foundation as a non-profit institution, and two small enterprises that offered consultancy and advisory services. All of them have favored the development of business, national, sectorial, international, territorial, institutional and local development projects.

Projects that include the participation of professors, researchers and students working through these interfaces, are able to meet the demands of all strategic sectors, particularly telecommunications and information, power generation, food production, industry, construction, biotechnological and pharmaceutical industries, logistics, water supply and sanitation networks, tourism and sugar agroindustry, among others.

Education, science and innovation continue to support the implementation of provincial and municipal development strategies; local innovation, self-management and sustainability systems at the municipal level, with the participation of Municipal University centers as key actors in the management of knowledge, with special emphasis on capacity-building, which is evidenced in the increased number of activities implemented in the territories. There are dozens of local development projects and technologies that have been certified and absorbed by the municipalities. There has been a significant increase of Research, Development and Innovation projects supporting the development of territories, including some with an international scope.

Cooperative scientific work with medical sciences universities has been gradually consolidating. An example of that is the Personalized Medicine program. Likewise, government projects such as *One Single Health* and *Climate Change and Health* have made it possible to implement national research and development, upgrading, training and capacity-building projects to prevent complex health and environmental risks.

The comprehensive development of biomedical basic sciences has promoted basic and basic and clinical researches involving all medical sciences universities in the country. Projects aimed at encouraging innovation in Medical Education are a major contribution to the

development and quality of the educational and teaching processes with the incorporation of Artificial Intelligence, the Flipped Classroom concept, augmented reality and simulation, among others.

All of the above conforms a vision of continuous training among our professionals, based on the enrollment of our undergraduate students in 112 careers and 64 high-level technical courses, whose study programs are increasingly aligned with the National Development Program by the Year 2030, looking for a more comprehensive, flexible and diverse post-graduate education.

Besides, the consolidation of the process of internationalization of higher education, which adopted a different design after the pandemic, has become an indispensable platform for the development of universities and has prioritized the interactions associated to the main goals pursued by the country. In this area we have taken into account not only national development and cooperation but also international assistance in solidarity with thousands of youths from all over the world, particularly from Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean.

Since the former Congress, our international relations have diversified despite the effects and conditions imposed by the blockade. Worth mentioning is our participation in academic networks with the purpose of improving the quality of higher education, which has increased the mobility of professors and researchers, with concrete results in terms of the strengthening of institutions, PhD research works as well as an important number of cooperative projects integrated into economic programs of relevance. These actions have contributed to a better training of the human potential demanded by the strategic sectors of the country.

The scholarships projects and programs aimed at the training of human resources have been equally relevant. Likewise, successful research programs are being implemented in the fields of artificial intelligence, neuro-sciences, energy and other specialties. New cooperation opportunities emerge and consolidate with countries of the region to which we are united by strong historical bonds. In the case of the African continent, we have academic relations with an important group of countries, based on our rich common history characterized by the defense of our sovereignty and identity. Joint actions have been implemented with the

Central American and Caribbean nations to respond to the economic, environmental and cultural challenges that we share.

Traditional relations with institutions, scientists and scholars from European countries have significantly increased. Likewise, we have carried out actions in order to consolidate relations with our counterparts from North America and steps have been taken to engage in joint projects with institutions from the Middle East.

During this period, the system of relations with international associations and bodies has strengthened, with a major impact on important scientific research works, faculty training and the development of a number of territories.

Our continued cooperation with UNESCO, IESALC, ENLACES, SEGIB, the Ibero-American University Council, the Inter-American University Organization, the Organization of Ibero-American States for Education, Science and Culture, among others, has been very positive.

The incorporation of several universities to the Ibero-American Post-graduate University Association, with which we maintain an already mature cooperation, as well as the *Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie*, has rendered favorable results.

We have also tried to collect funds through the development, transfer, marketing and export of goods and scientific and professional services both in the country and abroad. While the upward trend that existed in this area, prior to the pandemic, has been affected by the aforementioned factors that are beyond our control, including the profound transformation of the international market, the prestige of our universities and the quality of their faculties, will make it possible for us to head towards this very important path in order to strengthen intercultural relations and obtain the necessary revenues for our institutions.

We will continue working so that knowledge, science as well as the professionals trained in our institutions become *“transformative social forces that would help us to find innovative solutions to the many economic, social, political and cultural challenges facing our nation”* (Díaz-Canel, 2022). The values, competences and capabilities forged at the Cuban higher education institutions will allow us to continue promoting

Cuba's prosperous, sustainable and fair development while strengthening our independence and sovereignty.

Conclusions:

The wide range of issues to be discussed by different panels during the Congress will allow for collective enrichment from different views that will nevertheless be aligned with the common purpose of achieving a relevant, high quality, inclusive and accessible higher education for all.

If, during these days, we manage to equip ourselves with new ideas and alliances contributing to improve the continued training of professionals and the development of our institutions and societies, your presence in "University 2024" would have been fruitful.

Hard but fruitful and interesting days of work await us, which will not conclude with this event.

I wish all of you every success!

We will be looking forward to seeing you at "University 2026".

Thank you, very much.

References:

ENLACES. *La Visión del Espacio Latinoamericano y Caribeño de Educación Superior.* Third World Conference on Higher Education. 2022.

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