

Universities in Cuba: Being a Single Campus is not Enough

The exchange with university students and executives from Santiago de Cuba, Camagüey and Villa Clara, showed that, beyond challenges, fears and reluctance, it is worthwhile to continue to go for the commitment to territorially integrate Higher Education centers

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Publicado por: Margarita Barrios

“At first it seemed very difficult. That can not be denied, especially for those who came from other universities and had to take on our organizational system” said, undergraduate Jorge Ignacio Castañeda Lopez, who is majoring in telecommunications engineering at Marta Abreu Central University of Las Villas (UCLV).

"But being young people as we were, we soon complemented each other, until we felt like a great family," he said, already aware of all the possibilities the change entails, he is also a FEU leadership member in this center. «The Pedagogical pupils came full of new ideas, ready to contribute with their knowledge, which is a boon for teaching. Those of the Physical Culture Faculty, for their part, arrived with sports and recreational projects in the communities, something which has put the institution in the spotlight in Santa Clara,” he said.

The integration of Higher Education centers has called universities to combine knowledge, choose the best practices, promote the use of human and material resources, develop sciences, culture and sports, with greater registrations and more numerous and strengthened cloisters, during the last years.

Because adding the Pedagogical strategy of the territory and the Physical Culture Faculty to the university of the Higher Education Ministry (MES) of each province fell short. Uniting campuses, students, professors and managers was not enough; It was necessary to implement a new work strategy, and along that road the higher education centers across the country are moving today, not free from reluctance to change, successes and fears.

Beyond the challenges, there is the certainty that the integration process goes on, what the country undoubtedly needs to train more integral and competitive professionals. The exchange with university students and

executives from Santiago de Cuba, Camaguey and Villa Clara, showed that there are many reasons to keep going for the success of this endeavor.

UCLV rector Dr. Andrés Castro Alegría explained that this university center, which has just turned 65 years, continues to consolidate its academic maturity with important contributions to the socioeconomic development of the country.

"This was always the most multidisciplinary university in Cuba, and now integration serves to consolidate that. Today, 57 undergraduate and more than 47 postgraduate courses are studied in all branches of knowledge.

"Although in physical terms the integration concluded in the UCLV in 2016, the process includes syllabus rearrangements, as well as the structure and organization, which require a time for them to settle. All this will give a new quality to the university," he said.

Unlike Villa Clara's experience, marked by a physical distance between the headquarters of the pedagogical specialties and the campus of the UCLV, which in the outset made the work relationship more complex, in Camaguey the bonds between the Ignacio Agramonte and Loynaz University (UCIAL) and the Pedagogical university were always present, "mainly because the centers were very close and because one was born of the other, and that connection never broke", said UCIAL rector Santiago Lajes Choy.

"Pedagogical teachers regularly took postgraduate courses here, and vice versa. The students had parties at the current headquarters and those of the other center joined. There was always a great harmony, and that was something important to start the integration. In these moments only they are divided in faculties and specialties."

The Rector of Camaguey meant that each center belonged to different organisms, with totally different organizational cultures, "each with its good things and its not so good things, but with many more virtues than flaws. The biggest challenge was and still is to integrate and not join, and not replace one university with another. The greatest aim has to be to build a new one little by little."

In view of Camaguey's experience, Lajes Choy said that three years after the process began pedagogical studies and pure sciences have integrated in the same faculty. "There is a specialty in Pedagogical Computing and a pure one, and these specialties did not have to be in different faculties. Something similar happened with the Math teachers and those who studied the degree in that science. Some are trained to work in the business sector and others to teach, but nothing keeps them from being in the same grounds today.

We are carrying out a complex process in which many factors are involved, not only for the university as an institution, but also for the Cuban Higher Education system, he stressed.

"There are many specialties that should be integrated into one, with several outputs, and sometimes that decision restrains certain interests and is at odds with preconceptions that are hard to change, so it will have to remain a gradual transformation. In my opinion, little by little those who are reluctant will understand the new scenario and will see the need for change," he said.

Such opinion is shared by rector of the Universidad de Oriente Diana Sedal Yanes. "It will take many years to say that this process is over. Each center has its history, its practice, its ways of doing". And it is not possible to fully combine in a harmonious and useful way from one day to the next.

"It has been very good to work together. We came as certified universities on equal footing, and organizing that jointly was important. The results that are now shown are of an integrated university, with a great strength in

activity and potential. We have to follow the path to consolidation. As years wear on, it will be necessary to analyze everything in a consensual manner,” she said.

A Topic for Debate

In the Tenth Regular Period of the Eighth Legislature, the Commission of Education, Culture, Science, Technology and Environment of the National People's Power Assembly, discussed the successes and failures of the integration process, and it was announced that:

- Out of 69 Higher Education centers that were previously, today there are only 50.
- Out of 12 Central State Administration agencies (OACE) held by Higher Education centers, there are seven today, which has led to a greater rational use of resources and a greater comprehensive and multidisciplinary joint training.
- Out of seven accredited pedagogical specialties existing in 2014, today there are 24.
- The number of executives has been reduced, keeping the most suitable.
- From the necessary restructuring in each place (no one was unemployed), a better use of material and human resources has been promoted.
- The development of university sports has been strengthened and expanded upon the integration of the Physical Culture faculties.
- It is now time to evaluate the impact on the three basic functions of universities: undergraduate and graduate training, scientific research and innovation for development, and university extension, said First Vice President of the Councils of State and Ministers, member of the politburo Miguel Diaz-Canel Bermudez.

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