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Education and the Economy:

The Rising Private Sector's Effect on University Enrollment and Post-Graduation Employment in Contemporary Cuba

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During Cuba's Socialist Revolution of the 1960s, the education system was restructured to train and prepare citizens as part of the subsidized state-owned universal education model. In a centrally-planned system like Cuba's, the state determines the needs of the economy and provides corresponding funding for associated educational and vocational training programs. Students who graduate from these programs transition into government jobs with modest stipends to support the state. Fidel Castro envisioned this system as the solution to Cuba's instability based on full employment and prosperity for the public and for the state.

Change came in 2008 when presidential power was transferred from Fidel Castro to his more progressive brother, Raúl. Under his administration, new economic policy measures were instituted to legitimize private sector enterprise for the first time in over 50 years. Now, as Cuba enters a new chapter in its history with more private sector opportunities for young people, the national challenge is addressing the needs of both an unsustainable public sector model and the nationalized education system to better prepare and incentivize young educated people to stay in Cuba. Current literature and Cuban scholars point toward efforts to significantly restructure the Cuban socialist model to yield more incentives for young people to invest their energy and talents in Cuba.

“Within the Revolution, everything. Against the Revolution, nothing.”

- Fidel Castro, 1959

Introduction

In 1959, the island of Cuba experienced a revolution that would launch the small country onto the world stage. This radical social shift was the July 26 Movement of 1959, which became known as the Cuban Revolution, an armed revolt led by Fidel Castro and his allies to overthrow the authoritarian president.¹ Castro then replaced the country’s government with a radical socialist system, named himself president, and sought to build a country that favored equality, equitable distribution of wealth, and collectivist values for all Cubans. Under this new system, Castro’s government determined nearly all aspects of the economy and society, including education standards and employment opportunities.

As part of the Cuban Revolution, Castro nationalized all education institutions to support his universal education plan. His progressive literacy campaigns across Cuba in the 1960s were able to raise the country’s literacy rates to over 99%, which remains at this rate today.² Presently, the Cuban education system is heavily subsidized by the government in order to provide an equal opportunity for young people from all backgrounds to pursue post-secondary training and programs for future public employment opportunities. In a planned economy system, post-secondary program offerings are determined by the economic needs of the country. Universities and institutes offer programs based on their predicted economic demand in the country. The relationship between educational training programs and employment in a planned economy system establishes a pathway of controlled admission, education or training, and service to the country. From the government’s perspective, this system eliminates unemployment by providing free education to people seeking jobs in specific fields that are necessary to the economic needs of the country. The success of the Cuban education model is intentional, and builds on decades of investment and careful planning to enhance the country’s greatest asset—its human capital. This article seeks to explore the success of the Cuban education model in relationship to the economic challenges faced by the country during the past twenty years. Questions that informed this research include:

- 1) What can other countries learn from Cuba's unique education model?
- 2) How does the Cuban education system support the economic needs of the country?
- 3) What priorities has Cuba identified for higher education in response to the rise of private sector enterprise opportunities?

In December 2017, I traveled to Cuba to seek out answers to these questions and to better understand the relationship between education and economic development. Fieldwork research and interviews for this paper were conducted during a two-week faculty-led study abroad program titled "Havana: Governance, Community, and Contradiction" in collaboration with Dr. Kevin Kecskes of Portland State University. The university coordinated with Academic Programs International (API) to arrange for site visits, lectures, and tours that corresponded with research topics of the program participants.

This article summarizes research findings and recommendations for higher education and economic reform in Cuba. A brief overview provides context based on the current literature, and discusses the challenges of the current economic and education models in Cuba. Next, recommendations are made for an alternative sustainable economic model that would more closely align with Cuba's higher education capacity, as supported by current experts in the field. Finally, a brief section on limitations offers suggestions for future research topics before the summary conclusion.

Literature Review

Fidel Castro's revolutionary movement to replace Cuba's authoritarian government with radical socialism had a major effect on the country's education system. Historical and linguistic accounts feature Marxist-inspired phrases that dynamically illustrate the spirit of Fidel Castro's socialist movement.³ In support of this narrative, Cuban historian, Ana Sánchez, emphasizes that the Revolution restructured Cuba "for all, and for the good of all."⁴ Castro believed that radical socialism would create a new and better society using strategies of good governance so that all Cubans could prosper. But how would this "new and better" society be measured in Cuba? Berta Hernandez-Truyol addresses this challenge by exploring the components of "good governance,"⁵ which is "characterized by an effective, honest, equitable, transparent, and accountable manner by which power is exercised by the state in the management of a country's economic and social

resources.”⁶ Good governance is also often linked with democratic government systems,⁷ and to a country’s economic development—notably because investing resources into economic and social improvements supports a country’s services and institutions. However, as a single-party state with a centrally-controlled government, Cuba lacks many of the democratic pieces that “are grounded upon the privilege of individualistic, western, liberal ideology of civil and political rights” that traditionally define a system of “good governance.”⁸ Interestingly, Cuba’s development indicators for social, economic, and health-related development categories match those of Western industrialized nations, and in some cases even surpasses them.⁹ Based on this paradox, what if we were to reconsider how the system itself measures a country’s economic development?

It is important to consider the value systems that are used to measure and evaluate the achievements of another country. The United Nations Human Development Index (HDI) was created as an alternative to measuring a country’s success against its gross domestic product revenue. Instead, it “emphasizes that people and their capabilities should be the ultimate criteria for assessing the development of a country, not economic growth alone.”¹⁰ According to the HDI, Cuba “ranks 52nd among the [top] 55 high human development” countries,¹¹ with particularly high marks in categories such as “universal primary education,” “promoting gender equality,” “empowering women,” and “health care services.”¹² The results of the data from the Cuban Research Institute (CRI)¹³ indicate that scoring high on the HDI does not require a country to possess a democratic government with a liberalized free-market economy. In concert with Hernandez-Truyol, the CRI pushes for an alternative analysis tool that focuses on the outcomes or results of the measurement indicators instead of the inputs that many believe are ‘required’ for success.¹⁴

Regarding economic sustainability, Dr. Miguel Coyula and Dr. Enrique Gómez Cabezas acknowledge that Cuba’s current economic system is unsustainable due to overexpansion and a lack of resources.¹⁵ Cabezas points out that Cuba is currently struggling with issues on opposite ends of the spectrum - high education and low economic development.¹⁶ Coyula agrees, emphasizing that the country must re-examine its values and determine ways to create more quality jobs that provide elevated salaries.¹⁷ This proposed solution may involve revisiting the economic policies of the standard stipend for government workers, a move that could potentially challenge the entire political and economic system in Cuba. Both scholars agree that enacting solutions of this significance will require impressive change in societal values and beliefs of the Cuban people.

Finally, Theodore MacDonald provides a comprehensive development account of the Cuban education system,¹⁸ which is enhanced by perspectives from Vilaboy and Vega of the University of Havana.¹⁹ Building from this foundation, Gomez and Hare argue that Cuba is held back from its true potential because of the economic, political, and social structures as defined by communism.²⁰ They argue that the country's most valuable resource of untapped human capital is not fully leveraged by the Cuban education system or the public sector, translating to lost opportunities for public employment and civic engagement.²¹ Together, these perspectives highlight the role of the socialist revolution in restructuring the Cuban education system to provide for the economic needs of the state.

Historical Background: Education in Cuba

The Cuban education system has evolved through four distinct historical periods based either on a change in political leadership or on shifting priorities from changing economic factors.

The first period of development occurred after Cuba's independence from Spanish occupation in 1902.²² After decades of political frustration over the Platt Amendment,²³ the constitution of 1940 granted the Ministry of Education 34% of the government's budget—the largest share at the time—in order to develop educational infrastructure and training programs.²⁴ Although Batista became known in his later years as an extreme dictator, the reforms he initiated during his early years established the foundation for educational development in Cuba. These measures demonstrate the government's focus on investing in education for Cubans throughout the island regardless of their social status, highlighting the cultural value placed on learning and development throughout the country.

The second period encompasses the Socialist Revolution of 1959 and the Literacy Campaigns in the early 1960s, which helped to lift Cuban farmers and peasants out of poverty.²⁵ In his published manifesto based on his 1953 speech "History will Absolve Me," Castro proposed new reforms²⁶ that appealed to the hearts of his fellow citizens across the island. By establishing himself as the leader of the "New Cuba," Castro began to reshape the education system with financial support from two powerful communist countries, the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China. These partnerships financially supported the Literacy Campaigns from 1959 through 1962,²⁷ during which more than one million Cuban adults were taught to read and write through carefully planned mobilization of young teachers,

brigadistas, to spread the values and ideals of the Cuban revolution.²⁸ Castro was inspired by the critical pedagogy teachings of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire,²⁹ and structured his Literacy Campaigns to bring the experience of the classroom to isolated rural communities. These *brigadistas* implemented a new form of pedagogy that encouraged the students to take ownership of their learning and apply it to their environment.³⁰ Through the success of the literacy campaigns, Castro's administration effectively married revolutionary values with accessing literacy skills. This outcome had a powerful three-fold effect that returned dignity to the Cuban people, enabled a greater personal agency and investment in their education, and, perhaps most importantly, fostered trust and participation with their new government.

The third period of development changes in Cuba occurred during an economic depression in the 1990s known as the "Special Period." This depression resulted from a combination of mounting debt, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the pattern of dissolving socialist systems across Europe.³¹ The Cuban economy was devastated and could no longer support its large government infrastructure after losing significant financial support from foreign partners.³² The hardships experienced during this time significantly "lowered the expectations of many Cubans [for their government] and conditioned them away from relying on the state to solve all their needs."³³ Fidel's Revolution, founded on equality and collective values under a planned economy, was beginning to crumble as Cubans struggled to search for a possibility of a life outside of Cuba's revolution.

The fourth period involves the transition of presidential power in 2008 from Fidel Castro to his brother, Raúl Castro Ruz. Over the next ten years, he slowly reformed Cuba's socialist system by incorporating aspects of economic liberalization to loosen the restrictions on private sector enterprise. In an effort to address lingering economic issues from the "Special Period," President Raúl Castro consolidated industries and agencies to reduce the burden on the central government.³⁴ In addition, his administration also consolidated aspects of the higher education system that corresponded with these public sector reductions.³⁵ New policies were introduced authorizing private enterprise and the expansion of private sector opportunities, legalizing the work that many individuals had taken up under the black market during the "Special Period."³⁶ These policy efforts launched new opportunities for young entrepreneurs eager to enhance their living standards and engage with the new Cuban economy.

Discussion: Declining Cuban University Enrollments

In the early 2010s, President Raúl Castro's administration took a hard look at Cuban higher education for areas of consolidation and reduction in government spending. In 2008, Cuban universities enrolled 300,000 students annually, and by 2011 that number had dropped to 156,000.³⁷ Fewer young people were attending universities, opting instead to pursue other opportunities including employment in the private sector. In addition to education and training, Cuban citizens must complete two years of compulsory national service between the ages of 17 - 28 years of age.³⁸ This full-time service requirement can be satisfied before attending university or professional training institutions, or after completing an advanced degree.³⁹ Through this national service program, the Cuban government maintains a ready (and inexpensive) supply of young workers to support a variety of projects within the military and public branches of government.

Dr. Miguel Coyula suggests that the population of young educated people in Cuba is shrinking due to two factors—the lack of availability of government jobs and the average salary \$35 per month.⁴⁰ Although education in Cuba is free, the government salary does not allow for the comfortable lifestyle that many young Cubans desire. Instead of taking government jobs after graduating from university, many are looking instead to opportunities in the private sector or in other countries.⁴¹ Coyula suggests that as young people choose to pursue employment in the private sector, or even leave Cuba altogether, the country's population will continue to shrink. If this trend continues and state jobs continue to go unfilled, the government infrastructure may no longer be able to provide services and care for its aging population.

In response to this impending national crisis, President Raúl Castro's administration instituted multi-level policies aimed at decreasing government spending and consolidating departments within the education sector. At the university level, admissions standards were tightened to curtail the number of liberal arts programs, and at the high school secondary level, a "new emphasis [was] put on sciences, pedagogy, agriculture, and skilled trades."⁴² These measures will have implications both for the current generation of students and for future employment opportunities in Cuba.

Proposed Solutions for Economic Reform

The Cuban government system is "based on a centralized and planned economy, state ownership of property, and a one-party state...with the goal of

generating equitable income distribution and social equality.⁴³ Cuba's higher education system developed under communism as a means to achieve an egalitarian society for the country, further strengthening the connection between political ideology, education, and the economy. Gomez and Hare note that this system has "broken down the ability of individuals to claim ownership of central historical experiences, beliefs, values, and myths" in favor the values and experiences in a collectivist society.⁴⁴ Yet according to the Cuban Research Institute, the rise in poverty and inequality throughout the country "highlights the economic unsustainability of the island's current model...that exists alongside restricted political and economic rights, and impaired economic growth."⁴⁵ If the values of the Cuban model do not hold true in society, then the people will stop believing in them and the system will cease to survive.

Dr. Enrique Gómez Cabezas explains that Cuba is grappling with the challenges of a population with high levels of education and low levels of economic development.⁴⁶ "Couple this with an unsustainable government infrastructure and a challenging education system," he noted, "and the problems could transform into an impending national crisis very quickly."⁴⁷ Consider that the new generation of Cubans, those who grew up in a post-USSR reality and now account for nearly 20% of the country's population of 11 million, are starting to discover faults in the Marxist ideology of their country.⁴⁸ By opening up opportunities to engage in the private sector, Raul Castro intentionally incorporated new elements of capitalism into the Cuban economic system. Employment opportunities continue to shift as more young people decide to start small businesses instead of working in the public sector for a monthly government stipend.

The Cuban Research Institute found Cubans who grew up during the swell of the Cuban Revolution share the common mindset that "freedom is regarded as [an act of] national emancipation, as represented by the nationalistic revolutionary tradition under Fidel Castro."⁴⁹ This definition suggests that Cubans of this generation are free within the social confines of the revolution. Fidel Castro famously said "within the Revolution, everything; against the Revolution, nothing,"⁵⁰ and captured the hearts and minds of the Cuban people. As Raúl Castro steps out of the shadow of his older brother, a new chapter of economic development could emerge as a way to incentivize young educated Cubans to stay and invest in the future of their country.

Limitations and Questions for Future Research

As previously mentioned, the field work research and interviews were conducted during a two-week faculty-led study abroad program in Cuba in December 2017. Various site visits, lectures, and tours were arranged by the program administrators to supplement the research topics of eight graduate student participants. Limitations for this project are noted below:

Time limitations. This research paper was completed as part of a ten week graduate course and a two-week international fieldwork trip. The research gathered during this time period serves as an introduction into the relationship between the Cuban education system and its economic model. Devoting more time to gathering and interacting with the research would precipitate a deeper understanding of the information.

Linguistic limitations. The majority of the scheduled interactions with Cubans during the fieldwork experience were translated by government authorized interpreters. While this program feature contributes to the content-based understanding of these interactions, it also indicates a loss of contextual understanding by experiencing the country through the lens of a translator. In addition, the translation styles may vary depending on the translator's use of consecutive or simultaneous interpretation.

Questions for future research. If presented the opportunity to conduct additional research to expand information on this topic, it would be interesting to investigate how the Ministry of Higher Education and the Cuban Government are actively working to address the shrinking supply of trained civil servants in the public sector. Answers to these questions would expand the current research on programs and policies in Cuba aimed at stabilizing the public sector. It could also illuminate potential investment opportunities in local partnerships to incentivize young educated people to stay in Cuba.

Summary and Conclusion

Cuba is continuing to experience rapid change in multiple sectors of society. Challenges in the economic sector have led to transitions in political power, which have then led to restructuring the country's education system. The relationship between these two sectors in Cuba's planned economy system intentionally established a pathway of education training programs that led to public sector employment to serve the country. The success of the

Cuban education model depends on political and economic investment in order to continue enhancing the country's human capital.

Cuba's unique education model offer several lessons in alternative economic development models. By examining models of good governance, the Cuba's planned economy model effectively shifted the focus from standard economic outputs to a more humanistic and holistic approach, which resulted in positive trends in human capital investment. The country demonstrates a different path to human development success and challenges the assumptions that democracy and the free-market economy are the only way to achieve economic development.

The Cuban education system provides a pathway for young people to pursue training and employment in the public sector, but new opportunities are challenging this reality. The planned economy model is no longer sustainable, and the country is struggling beneath the financial weight of the system. As the private sector continues to grow, so will the possibilities for work that is creative, innovative, and offers the chance of a better life. Scholars contend that the Cuban government must develop new economic priorities, which include developing more favorable incentives for young educated people to stay in Cuba. Considering these trends, Fidel Castro in 2015 emphasized his life-long struggle to promote his revolutionary values in his country:

*The equal right of all citizens to health, education, work, food, security, culture, science, and wellbeing - that is, the same rights we proclaimed when we began our struggle, in addition to those which emerge from our dreams of justice and equality for all inhabitants of our world - is what I wish for all.*⁵¹

In the 1960s these words may have stirred patriotic emotions for young Cubans, yet today many people may find that these words no longer ring true. Castro's efforts to instill societal values of equality, communal ownership, and a more equitable distribution of wealth have proven increasingly difficult to sustain. However, economic prospects are changing for young people under President Raúl Castro. His role in supporting the rising private sector has proven to be one of the most significant economic development strategies of the past decade. Fidel Castro's established legacy is the Revolution, and Raúl Castro's legacy may perhaps be a more liberalized economy that will positively impact future generations in Cuba.

Notes

- ¹ Sergio Guerra Vilaboy and Oscar Layola Vega, *Cuba, A History* (London: Ocean Press, 2015).
- ² ACEI Global, "15 Facts on Cuba and its Education System," January 3, 2018, <https://acei-global.blog/2015/01/08/15-facts-on-cuba-and-its-education-system/>.
- ³ Vilaboy and Vega, *Cuba, A History*.
- ⁴ Ana Sánchez, *History of José Martí*, personal collection from Havana, Cuba: Centro de Estudios Martianos, 2017.
- ⁵ Berta Esperanza Hernandez-Truyol, "Cuba and Good Governance," *Transnational Law and Contemporary Problems* 14, no. 2 (2004), 655-683.
- ⁶ Cuban Research Institute, "Governance and Social Justice in Cuba: Past, Present, and Future," *The Canadian Foundation for the Americas* (Vancouver, CA, 2005), 2.
- ⁷ Hernandez-Truyol, "Cuba and Good Governance."
- ⁸ *Ibid*, 668.
- ⁹ United National Development Programme, "Human Development Index (HDI)," *Human Development Reports* (2016), <http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/human-development-index-hdi>.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid*.
- ¹¹ *Ibid*.
- ¹² Hernandez-Truyol, "Cuba and Good Governance," 669-675.
- ¹³ Cuban Research Institute, "Governance and Social Justice in Cuba."
- ¹⁴ *Ibid*.
- ¹⁵ Enrique Gómez Cabezas, *Governance and Community in Cuba*, private lecture (Havana, Cuba: Universidad Central de las Villas, 2017).
- ¹⁶ *Ibid*.
- ¹⁷ Miguel Coyula, *Havana: Past, Present, and Future*, personal collection from Havana, Cuba: University of Havana, 2017.
- ¹⁸ Theodore H. MacDonald, *Making a New People: Education in Revolutionary Cuba* (Vancouver, CA: New Star Books, 1985).
- ¹⁹ Vilaboy and Vega, *Cuba, A History*.
- ²⁰ Andy S. Gomez and Paul Webster Hare, "How Education Shaped Communist Cuba and Why It's Key to Restoring the Country's Relationship with the U.S.," *The Atlantic*, February 26, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/02/how-education-shaped-communist-cuba/386192/>.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Cuban Research Institute, "Governance and Social Justice in Cuba."

²³ Vilaboy and Vega, *Cuba, A History*, 40.

²⁴ Gomez and Hare, "How Education Shaped Communist Cuba."

²⁵ Vilaboy and Vega, *Cuba, A History*.

²⁶ Ibid., 74-75.

²⁷ MacDonald, *Making a New People: Education in Revolutionary Cuba*.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970).

³⁰ MacDonald, *Making a New People: Education in Revolutionary Cuba*, 75-76.

³¹ Vilaboy and Vega, *Cuba, A History*.

³² Julia E. Cooke, *The Other Side of Paradise: Life in the New Cuba* (New York, New York: Seal Press, 2014).

³³ Cuban Research Institute, "Governance and Social Justice in Cuba," 7.

³⁴ Steven Visser and Catherine E. Sholchet, "Cuba: What's Next Under Castro?" *CNN* (November 28, 2016), <https://www.cnn.com/2016/11/28/americas/cuba-future-raul-castro/index.html>.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Marc Frank, "Cuba Cuts Education Spending, Shifts Priorities," *Reuters News Agency* (October 3, 2012), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-cuba-education/cuba-cuts-education-spending-shifts-priorities-idUSBRE89217O20121003>.

³⁸ CIA World Factbook, "Central American and Cuba," accessed November 9, 2017, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/cu.html>.

³⁹ Emily Moran (Assistant Resident Director, Academic Programs International), personal communication, Havana, Cuba: Centro de Estudios Marianos, December 2017.

⁴⁰ Coyula, *Havana: Past, Present, and Future*.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Frank, "Cuba Cuts Education Spending, Shifts Priorities."

⁴³ Cuban Research Institute, "Governance and Social Justice in Cuba," 6.

⁴⁴ Gomez and Hare, "How Education Shaped Communist Cuba."

⁴⁵ Cuban Research Institute, "Governance and Social Justice in Cuba," 7.

⁴⁶ Cabezas, *Governance and Community in Cuba*.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

- ⁴⁸ Gomez and Hare, "How Education Shaped Communist Cuba."
- ⁴⁹ Cuban Research Institute, "Governance and Social Justice in Cuba," 2.
- ⁵⁰ Nick Miroff, "Cuba: Nothing Against the Revolution," *GlobalPost and Public Radio International*, April 23, 2010, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2010-04-30/cuba-nothing-against-revolution>.
- ⁵¹ Vilaboy and Vega, *Cuba, A History*, 105.

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