

Original article

Problems of distance postgraduate academic training at the University of Havana





Problemática de la formación académica de posgrado a distancia en la Universidad de la Habana

Problema da formação acadêmica de pós-graduação a distância na Universidade de Havana

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ABSTRACT

Postgraduate education is responsible for planning, designing, and implementing the continuing professional development and lifelong learning of professionals who have earned university degrees. It employs a variety of methodological resources; among them, distance education offers an access and training opportunity for professionals who must balance their education with other responsibilities in their daily lives and work, ensuring that none takes precedence over the other. In this educational modality, students and professors do not need to be in the same place at the same time; students complete program activities and receive guidance and tutoring according to their

individual needs. It is a complex process, regulated by the Ministry of Higher Education and supported by methodological resources developed by Higher Education Institutions recognized by the Ministry. Scientific research on distance education is conducted from the perspectives of education and social sciences, contributing to its theoretical and methodological development, as well as to the evaluation and validation of implementation experiences. This work presents theoretical and methodological aspects of the problem, describes its empirical expression at the University of Havana, establishes essential elements for the design of the study, and offers conclusions as a closing of the proposal, along with the bibliography used.

Keywords: postgraduate academic training; distance education.

RESUMEN

La educación de posgrado se encarga de proyectar, diseñar e implementar la superación continua y la formación permanente de los profesionales que han alcanzado grados universitarios. Para ello dispone de variados recursos metodológicos; entre ellos, la modalidad de Educación a Distancia representa una posibilidad de acceso y formación para profesionales que deben compatibilizar su educación con otras responsabilidades de su vida cotidiana y laboral, de forma que ninguna tenga preeminencia sobre otra. En esta modalidad educativa, estudiantes y profesores no necesitan coincidir en tiempo y espacio; los estudiantes desarrollan las actividades del programa y reciben asesoría y tutoría según sus necesidades particulares. Es un proceso complejo, regulado por normativas del Ministerio de Educación Superior y sustentado en recursos metodológicos generados por Instituciones de Educación Superior reconocidas por la comunidad del MES. Se realiza investigación científica sobre la Educación a Distancia desde las ciencias de la educación y las ciencias sociales, lo que contribuye a su desarrollo teórico-metodológico, a la evaluación y a la validación de experiencias en su implementación. Este trabajo expone aspectos teórico-metodológicos de la problemática, describe su expresión empírica en la Universidad de La Habana, fundamenta elementos esenciales para el diseño del estudio y ofrece conclusiones como cierre de la propuesta, junto con la bibliografía utilizada.

Palabras clave: formación académica de posgrado; educación a distancia.

RESUMO

A educação de pós-graduação é responsável por planejar, desenhar e implementar a melhoria contínua e a formação permanente dos profissionais que obtiveram títulos universitários. Para isso, dispõe de diversos recursos metodológicos, entre eles a modalidade Educação a Distância representa a possibilidade de acesso e formação para profissionais que devem compatibilizar sua formação com outras responsabilidades do seu cotidiano e trabalho, para que nenhuma tenha preeminência sobre a outra. Nesta modalidade educacional, alunos e professores não precisam coincidir no tempo e no espaço, os alunos desenvolvem as atividades do programa, recebem orientações e reforços de acordo com suas necessidades particulares. É um processo complexo, regulado por regulamentos do Ministério do Ensino Superior e recursos metodológicos gerados em Instituições de Ensino Superior aceites pela comunidade MES. A pesquisa científica em Educação a Distância é realizada a partir das ciências da educação e das ciências sociais, contribuindo para o seu desenvolvimento teórico-metodológico, avaliação e validação de experiências na sua implementação. Uma modesta contribuição é este artigo, cujo objetivo é propor o desenho de um estudo científico sobre a implementação da formação acadêmica de pós-graduação a distância a partir da projeção institucional do HU como contribuição para o desenvolvimento desta modalidade de estudo nesta instituição de ensino superior. A apresentação expõe aspectos teórico-metodológicos do problema; descreve sua expressão empírica na Universidade de Havana; fundamenta elementos essenciais para o desenho do estudo; oferece duas conclusões como encerramento da proposta e da bibliografia utilizada.

Palavras-chave: formação acadêmica de pós-graduação; educação a distância.

INTRODUCTION

At the Regional Conference on Higher Education (CRES), held in Argentina in 2018, activities were developed that marked the advancement of the postgraduate education level, such as the UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education in 2022.

Postgraduate education is undertaken after obtaining an initial university degree: advanced technical degree, bachelor's degree, engineering degree, or medical degree. Its fundamental purposes are professional development and the attainment of higher academic and scientific degrees. It is carried

out at Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and/or Science, Technology, and Innovation Entities (STIs).

Fernández, García and Pell (2024) argue that current trends in the training of professionals of any profile in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) imply an advanced study regarding the understanding of the term *qualification*, whose analysis is still insufficient at present.

Postgraduate academic training in the Distance Education (DE) modality can play a particular role in the realization of the principles of postgraduate education and in the achievement of its goals, due to the complementarity it establishes with the political, productive, social and educational environment in which it is implemented (MES, 2019, Art. 4-10; CNEaD, 2018).

In the Regulations for Postgraduate Education of the Republic of Cuba (MES, 2019), Article 8, distance learning (DL) is distinguished from the student's perspective, recognizing it as a "study modality." This constitutes a particular way of engaging with knowledge, assimilating it, and being evaluated. It corresponds to a specific modality for receiving instruction, consultation, advising, and tutoring. Article 61 has a more extensive theoretical content and, in our opinion, unequivocally qualifies DL as a differentiated educational modality, based on student self-management -learning and application of knowledge-; complex, because it includes processes of both practical and intellectual actions; and relational, due to the quality it demands in the interactions among participants.

The *Manual for Postgraduate Management* (DEP, 2020), a subsidiary document of the Regulations, dedicates Chapter VI to distance education as a study modality. In practical terms, the National Center for Distance Education (CNED) of the University of Computer Sciences (UCI) published the *Cuban Higher Education Distance Education Model in 2018*, which includes theoretical and methodological foundations and practical processes for its implementation.

Professionals pursuing postgraduate academic training through the ED program can continue their work activities, making the expected contributions and developing new scientific and innovative work that qualifies them for higher-level contributions. From this position, they can connect with other professionals with greater work experience and/or theoretical and methodological training, with other students in training, and with the faculty of the academic program.

In this way, the principles and aims of postgraduate education are fulfilled; among them, by way of example:

- **Article 4:** "Postgraduate education, as the highest level of the education system, guarantees the continuous improvement of university graduates."
- **Article 6:**
 - b) "Promoting access to the most advanced national and international frontiers of knowledge".
 - c) "The promotion of the sustainable development of society through the training of professionals in close connection with practice, as a transformative social force."
 - e) "The promotion of multidisciplinary, interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity, as well as inter-institutional collaboration of a regional, national and international nature" (MES, 2019).

Distance education has been implemented at the University of Havana (UH) in both undergraduate and graduate programs. However, it achieved a higher level of institutionalization, organization, and implementation in undergraduate programs with the creation of the Faculty of Distance Education in the 1979-1980 academic year. This faculty served as a coordinating center for distance learning in various degree programs. It did not have its own teaching and methodological staff; program development, guidance, and content evaluation were carried out by the faculty members responsible for the same programs within the regular daytime curriculum. This system remained in place until the 2005-2006 academic year.

Subsequently, the Municipal University Centers (SUM) were created, and distance learning was transferred to these centers until the 2009-2010 academic year, when they closed and the programs were reintegrated into the responsible faculties (CNED, 2018, p. 4). It is worth noting that, according to studies on the experience and its impacts, the study modality implemented in the SUMs corresponded more to blended learning and certain elements of in-person instruction than to distance learning proper (Román, 2011).

The University of Havana's greatest experience in postgraduate training through distance learning has been in professional development courses, not in the design of postgraduate academic programs or doctoral programs. Distance learning elements have been used sporadically or in specific situations to complement in-person and blended learning programs.

During the period of greatest impact from the COVID-19 pandemic in Cuba (2020 and 2021), all programs had to decide between immobilization or continuity of training, assuming a redesign towards the ED modality or towards minimum semi-presential formats.

To facilitate, regulate, and legitimize these activities, the Ministry of Higher Education (MES) issued several regulations: Resolutions 51/2020, 52/2020, and 3/2021, as well as Instruction 2/2020 from the president of the National Commission for Scientific Degrees. Both the need for these regulations and their content reflect the lack of prior, consolidated, and legitimate experience in distance postgraduate education within the MES system.

The objective of this work is to provide a foundation for the design of a scientific study on the implementation of distance postgraduate academic training at the University of Havana, as a contribution to the development of this study modality in said Higher Education institution.

The relevance of this scientific effort corresponds to the arguments of the researcher Guadalupe del Pilar Murillo Campuzano, who in her article "Scientific research and postgraduate studies, an indispensable tool in the university of the 21st century" argues that "universities constitute the backbone of the scientific-technological subsystem and, therefore, it is their responsibility to stimulate the creative spirit, scientific research and postgraduate studies, which represents the starting point of all efforts to improve science and technology" (Murillo, 2019).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research required both theoretical methods (systemic-structural-functional and historical-logical) and empirical methods (observation and document analysis, primarily to establish or define criteria), which facilitated work with general and specific literature. This approach enabled the establishment of the conceptual, contextual, and theoretical framework, as well as the identification of the main manifestations of the object of study and the relationships and components that influence it. Furthermore, it allowed for inferences to be drawn and theoretical positions to be adopted based on the findings.

For this purpose, theoretical-methodological elements were considered; the reflection was guided by the analytical-synthetic theoretical method, and the information was selected using the empirical method of documentary research.

RESULTS

To achieve greater clarity, organicity, and coherence in the research, this section is subdivided into different parts.

The problematic situation determined

In approaching the proposed object of study -postgraduate academic training in the distance learning modality- the fact that the authors are members of the Postgraduate Directorate at the University of Havana has proven invaluable. Three of them have less than a semester of experience in the field, but possess extensive experience as faculty members (Ortiz, García, and López) and in coordinating a master's program in the face-to-face modality (Ortiz). The author with the longest tenure in the area has dedicated himself to managing postgraduate academic programs designed in face-to-face and blended learning modalities. Therefore, knowledge about the object of study is still in an exploratory diagnostic phase.

The main experience of the UH in Distance Education (DE) has been developed in undergraduate teaching, where it was implemented for various careers and there was a Faculty of Distance Education (FED), a center that coordinated the relations between students and institution, and between students and faculty.

The University of Havana (UH) has not developed distance learning (ED) for postgraduate education. While some activities that include blended or online components are often recognized as such, they lack a comprehensive theoretical and methodological framework for this modality. Therefore, distance postgraduate education at the UH represents a potential, a necessity, and a project that has not yet been implemented.

This situation misses opportunities to diversify access for professionals in the country and contribute to the implementation of the policy of universal accessibility to all levels of education. It also misses opportunities to internationalize postgraduate academic training programs through the inclusion of international students, the integration of international faculty, and the development of joint research.

Both actions could improve the efficiency of the UH's academic programs. Furthermore, the potential economic benefits of the ED (Distance Learning) program are being overlooked, as it would reduce postgraduate academic training costs for both the University of Havana and the students' home

institutions (due to work time, travel, and living expenses), as well as the personal costs for non-resident or international students related to accommodation.

When examining the standards for quality assessment in postgraduate academic training programs (SEA-ES, SEA-M, and SEA-EP), it is observed that distance education is primarily addressed through the *Infrastructure variable*, which refers to the existence and development of digital and telecommunications infrastructure, without sufficiently considering the methodological design of the activities carried out on these platforms. Even in this aspect, the University of Havana faces disadvantages, as it has insufficient technological resources that limit the efficient delivery of postgraduate distance learning activities.

Based on this background, a fundamental contradiction is clarified that must be resolved through the scientific study whose design is proposed in this work: at the University of Havana, Distance Education is not implemented in postgraduate academic training, wasting the regulatory and methodological framework created for this purpose, as well as its relevance in relation to current trends in postgraduate studies and the country's economic context.

Essential elements for the design of the study

Having analyzed and understood the problematic situation of distance postgraduate academic training at the University of Havana, and having identified a fundamental contradiction within it, according to the authors' perspective, the essential elements that articulate the proposed scientific study are established. These elements are the subject of reflection and debate, to which this dissemination work is expected to contribute, with the aim of subjecting them to a broader collective judgment that will allow for their refinement and evaluation.

The process will be delimited by the search for answers on the development of distance education in postgraduate academic training at the University of Havana, forming its referential framework in this area.

Furthermore, it will be necessary to define a time frame within which to select and verify the expression of the components of the object of study. The analysis will cover the period from 1993 to 2023.

In 1993, the Ministry of Higher Education (MES) approved the Regulations for Postgraduate Education in the Republic of Cuba for the first time. These regulations introduced elements for designing and managing postgraduate education using technological resources to facilitate blended and distance learning modalities in certain educational activities. Subsequently, the issue became more complex, and the regulations in force in 2023 include more specific and precise guidelines for distance education.

As annexes to the Regulations, in 2006 the Postgraduate Education Directorate of the Ministry of Higher Education (MES) approved for the first time the *Standards and Procedures for Postgraduate Management*, which in 2020 were renamed the *Manual for Postgraduate Management*. In 1999, the MES also approved a standard for the evaluation and accreditation of quality in Cuban Higher Education: the University System of Accreditation Programs (SUPRA), which was replaced in 2018 by the Higher Education Evaluation and Accreditation System (SEAES).

In accordance with the purpose of the study -of a diagnostic and exploratory nature-, it is proposed to expand the collection of information and the reflection that provide answers to the recognition of the factors that favor distance postgraduate academic training at the University of Havana.

The methodological approach will be based on posing and answering questions scientific and in carrying out investigative tasks aimed at the comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon.

DISCUSSION

The research aims to foster complementarity in the application of methodologies, using the results obtained through each research method and/or technique as starting points or objects of analysis for reflection from another perspective. This applies both to the methodology for theoretical analysis and to that which ensures the collection of empirical data, along with the widely recognized and anticipated reflection on empirical data using theoretical methods.

The theoretical methods employed, ranging from the systemic-structural-functional to the analytical-synthetic, constitute the methodological framework for analyzing theoretical conceptions and methodological proposals on distance learning in higher education, with a particular focus on postgraduate education and, within this, on postgraduate academic training. This will enable the understanding and explanation of the elements that contribute to the overall objective and the research questions, and, based on these, the development of a synthesized generalization that

underpins the initial assumptions for the development of distance doctoral training at the University of Havana.

The historical-logical method offers an analytical perspective that will reveal the sequence in which elements of distance education in higher education and postgraduate studies have been introduced into regulatory documents and the management of postgraduate academic training, as well as the reasons why they were considered relevant at each stage. Combined with an analytical-synthetic approach, this will connect theoretical concepts and methodological proposals with the management practices of postgraduate academic training that incorporate elements of distance learning. This will define the experiences that contribute to and their relevance for consideration in distance postgraduate academic training at the University of Havana.

The inductive-deductive method is a scientific reasoning tool with a leading role in exploratory diagnostic studies; it relies on elements defined by the analytical-synthetic and historical-logical methods. It contributes to identifying the components of the problematic situation, defining the general objective and research questions, and explaining the interrelationships of these three research components. It guides the projection and interrelation of the scientific novelty, the theoretical contribution, and the practical contribution of this research. It will be a primary means of substantiating the analysis of the correspondence between the premises and the research results, which will be contained in the conclusions.

The main empirical methods are based on documentary analysis, an analytical-synthetic process in which the information contained in a document is studied, interpreted, and synthesized to produce a new document that represents it in a concise yet precise manner. Because it focuses on information about the object of study, the aspects of interest to the researcher are more easily expressed by separating them from other information in the original document. It will be used from an integrative perspective, considering both the formal characteristics of the document and its specific content related to the object of study. It includes several operations: physical and/or formal description, content analysis, and selection of other relevant data. It will be applied to: ministerial and University of Havana (UH) regulations on postgraduate studies and the distance learning modality; other UH institutional documents related to postgraduate studies and distance learning that are relevant to the research; the documentary scientific production on postgraduate studies and distance learning at the UH; and national and international scientific production on the object of study (Peña and Pirela, 2017).

The survey is a method by which the object of research is described, analyzed, and synthesized. It is broad and complex; it relies on the analysis of prior information to determine the need for data collection from the research subjects, define those subjects, and determine the data collection techniques to be used. The planning of this method considers, first and foremost, the characteristics of the information needed, the subjects' availability to participate, and their educational and cultural level, as well as how the interviewer will be able to access them.

This is the starting point for selecting data collection techniques: questionnaires and interviews; both techniques have a diverse typology that is used as expressed in the previous sentence. The diverse information collected in various quantitative expressions -quantity, ratio, percentage, gradation, index, rate- is analyzed -by triangulation, reduction, and comparison- to synthesize it and thus be taken as a result of research using this method (López-Roldán & Fachelli, 2015, pp. 8-12).

The expert judgment method offers the possibility of understanding, reflecting upon, and synthesizing criteria formed through the systematic practice of research subjects in the activity under study. Its essential starting point, and first reflective step, is the selection of criteria to determine the subjects' expertise -their levels- and the identification of accessible subjects who meet those criteria. The particular quality of the information obtained through this method is that the subjects, in addition to being involved in the object of study -as users, stakeholders, demanders, or decision-makers- possess a high and complex level of knowledge about the object or about some of its aspects or components (Rojas *et al.*, 2023).

A variety of research techniques have been generated that serve as a means for the application of the method, which makes it possible to collect information through individual consultations and group work; even the combination of both, when successive rounds of collection and synthesis of independent responses are carried out, the result of which is sent back to the experts, in a cycle that increases the rigor of the analysis (Díaz Ferrer *et al.*, 2020).

Throughout the entire process of a scientific study, contributions can be made to the body of procedures, logical steps, methods, and knowledge accumulated up to that point. Even if they may seem simple or irrelevant at times, their usefulness will always be demonstrated by their incorporation into scientific practice and by the acquisition of qualitatively different knowledge through these resources (Tejada & Ruiz Bueno, 2016). Regardless, according to current scientific

culture, the design of a scientific study should declare: the expected scientific novelty, theoretical and methodological contribution, and practical contribution (González *et al.*, 2014).

Valiente *et al.* (2022), research in a knowledge area makes its main contributions to the theoretical-conceptual system associated with the object of study, making it necessary to intentionally select (assign) research topics based on their derivation from problems of theoretical and practical interest defined from the identified lines of research.

The systematization of theoretical and methodological aspects particularizes the Distance Learning modality in postgraduate academic training and the treatment of this study modality in the ministerial regulations to regulate, manage and evaluate postgraduate studies and their management.

The theoretical and methodological contribution results when the research work distinguishes the theoretical and methodological foundations of distance postgraduate academic training as a particularity with respect to other modalities, which is complemented by the systematization of the treatment of this study modality in the postgraduate regulations and the evaluation of the quality of the MES.

There will also be a practical contribution with the synthetic analysis of the use of elements of the ED modality in the implementation of postgraduate academic training at the University of Havana and of the experiences of the managers, the faculty and the doctoral students involved.

The scientific study on the implementation of the Distance Education modality in postgraduate academic training requires knowing, interpreting and applying the ministerial and institutional regulations on the subject, as well as knowing, applying and analyzing research methods and techniques that contribute to the design, negotiation and agreement on the methodological resources to transmit, incorporate, evaluate and validate knowledge, skills and factual results.

The subjects participating in the study must represent the actors related to the implementation of the Distance Education modality in postgraduate academic training at the UH: decision-makers-directors, methodologists, faculty, ECTI professionals, students and service personnel (teaching secretariat, infocommunication technologists, documentation centers, among others).

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Conflict of interest

Authors declare no conflict of interests.

Authors' contribution

The authors participated in the design and writing of the article, in the search and analysis of the information contained in the consulted bibliography.



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