

Leading article

## **Flexible university education: horizon and commitment in Cuba and Latin America**



### **Educación universitaria flexible: horizonte y compromiso en Cuba y América Latina**

### **Educação universitária flexível: horizonte e compromisso em Cuba e na América Latina**

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**H**igher education is undergoing a profound transformation. In Cuba and Latin America, traditional university models, centered on in-person attendance and full-time dedication to study, coexist with new social, economic, and technological realities that demand more flexible and inclusive alternatives. Increasingly, students combine work with university studies, seek personalized learning paths, and value the possibility of studying in online formats. In this context, the university of the future must be more open, diverse, and integrated with the daily lives of its students.

In Cuba, this change is visible and sustained. The Ministry of Higher Education recognizes that a significant portion of university enrollment is comprised of young workers. Official data from 2023 indicate that more than 50% of students are enrolled in non-daytime programs, especially in part-time and distance learning (Ministry of Higher Education, 2023). This data reflects a social reality: studying while working has ceased to be the exception and has become a necessity. Since 1979, nearly half a million Cubans have received distance education, demonstrating the inclusive reach of the system (Pichs, 2019). These figures reveal that access to university increasingly depends on the institutional capacity to adapt to diverse work and family contexts.

Recent policies promoted by the Ministry of Higher Education are precisely aimed at this transformation. Resolution 17/2025 introduced the cumulative academic credit system at the undergraduate level, which allows for greater mobility and curricular flexibility, recognizes prior learning, and makes it easier for students to organize their academic workload according to their circumstances (Official Gazette, 2025). This reform aligns with the recommendations of UNESCO and the International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP), which urge higher education systems to offer flexible pathways to respond to the diversity of students, especially those who work or have family responsibilities (UNESCO-IIEP, 2024).

At the same time, Cuba has developed mechanisms to strengthen the link between study and work. Initiatives such as part-time work contracts for university students and the creation of new teaching employment entities, where young people can apply their learning in real-world production and service settings, represent significant progress. Furthermore, the pursuit of intermediate qualifications, such as the Higher Technician diploma, is promoted, allowing students to enter the labor market without abandoning their university studies. These measures are consistent with the Cuban tradition of viewing study and work as integrated dimensions of human development.

At the regional level, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) notes that more than 60% of Latin American students combine employment and education, highlighting the need for policies that recognize the dual status of working students (IDB, 2020). This trend presents new challenges for universities: flexible schedules, hybrid or virtual options, transferable credit systems, and assessment of job skills. The region is moving towards a model in which higher education is conceived not as a closed stage, but as a continuous, lifelong process.

In Cuba, these debates take on relevance given the current socioeconomic conditions. The need to integrate into the workforce, contribute to family support, and maintain professional training presents the university with an ethical and pedagogical challenge: ensuring that no one is excluded from learning for economic or time-related reasons. Flexibility, therefore, should not be understood merely as an organizational matter, but as a principle of equity. By adapting its model to the circumstances of its students, the Cuban university reaffirms its commitment to social justice and inclusion.

From the Center for Educational Sciences Studies and the *Mendive* Journal, we reaffirm our mission to support these processes of change through research and critical reflection. We are committed to promoting studies that address flexible learning modalities, hybrid education, the integration of work

into professional training, and personalized learning pathways as strategic themes for contemporary university development.

We invite researchers, professors, and administrators in higher education to publish their findings, experiences, and proposals on new ways of learning and teaching in the 21st-century university in this academic forum. Only through collaborative research, pedagogical innovation, and institutional openness can we build a flexible, inclusive, and sustainable university education system capable of supporting today's young workers in shaping their professional and personal futures.

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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 leading article.



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