

Background and Development of the Distance Education Program in Cuba: Guided Education

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Background

Since the triumph of the revolution in 1959 there have been substantial transformations in many fields, education being one of the most important. There has also been a great improvement in the National Education System as a whole, which involved important qualitative and quantitative changes that, in large measure, contributed to an extraordinary growth in student admissions at all levels, but especially at the university level.

In 1978, more than 145,000 students, 50% of whom were workers, were admitted to the bachelor level. However, it was still necessary to increase the capacity to allow access to more young graduates from colleges and technological institutions. In such conditions, it was impossible to increase the spaces in the regular courses for workers in a way that would allow all qualified students, or all those who had prospects of achieving the required level, to enter higher education, but, on the other hand, our workers' interest in studying should not be restricted.

To fulfil this clear need of our population, the Ministry of Higher Education set out to organize a new education modality in the country that would combine adequately the available facilities and human resources with the study aspirations of our people. And that is how Guided Education - Distance Education - began in Cuba in 1979–1980, coinciding with the decade in which this modality was at its peak in the world.

Higher Education in Cuba was organized as follows:

- day regular courses
- regular courses for workers – afternoon-evening courses – meeting courses
- guided courses The first two correspond to face-to-face education.

The Guided Education Model

The model applied is a mixed one, characterized by little exchange and more structure; it is based on independent work as the method and on self-preparation as the form. Therefore, it is supported mainly by written didactic materials, into which, over time and on an experimental basis, supplementary media have been incorporated, such as video, radio, and audio tapes. Direct contact with the professor is not under consideration at the moment.

The following factors were taken into account in creating and applying Guided Education:

- to allow access to Higher Education to everybody who wishes it and who has passed the previous academic level
- to optimize the use of physical facilities and the maximum number of available professors
- to offer several degree options to which all citizens would be admitted without interfering with their work and in which the intensity of their studies is compatible with the amount of time they have available and their intellectual capacity
- to maintain the demanding level of the exams to guarantee that the quality of the graduates of this type of education is equal to that of the regular courses.

This new education modality did not emerge as an institution independent of the ones already established; instead it was made part of the organized structure of face-to-face education and its operation was based on using the faculty who teach the regular courses.

The Guided Education Faculty of the Universidad de La Habana was given the responsibility of acting as managing centre for the Guided Courses, and currently, with the other Faculties, it coordinates the service activities according to established organizational structure.

Organization

Actual Organization of Guided Education

Guided Education is offered throughout the country, and there are 15 centres to fulfil the needs of the entire country; they are organized in the following manner:

- four centres of Territorial Higher Education
- six centres of Provincial Higher Education
- five institutions of Municipal or Provincial responsibility.

This structure and the number of different types of centres accord with each region's characteristics and with the requirements demanded by the total number of enrolled students.

In the same way, all university centres use the existing facilities for Regular Courses in Guided Courses.

Organization for the five areas of study and all the courses offered requires interrelationships among six faculties and 29 teaching departments, with more than 500 teachers involved.

Admission

Admission to Guided Courses is open to all citizens who have passed the higher or middle-higher level.

Today, there are more than 20,000 students taking the five degrees offered in all the centres of the country, about 50% of whom are at the Universidad de La Habana.

While doing their course, the students can select the subjects they wish, as long as they follow the order of precedence, from a minimum of 4 to a maximum of 24 courses. With this arrangement, the students have different options for passing their course's study plan, according to their intellectual ability, available time, motivations, and study experience.

Both admission and evaluation activities are free of charge for the students.

Enrolment figures can be categorized as follows: approximately 15% in Economic Sciences and the rest in the Social Sciences and Humanities, of whom more than half belong to the Law course.

In general, approximately 40% of the students who were enrolled in the previous course pass each academic course.

Study Plans

The study plans offered in the Guided Courses are basically structured in three years of courses:

- First year: Basic general and social subjects
- Second year: Basic-specific subjects
- Third year: Subjects of a professional nature

Each year is organized in two or more fundamental groups, and each of them is made up of subjects taken in a mandatory order according to the degree's nature.

At present five degrees are offered by this education modality. They are:

- Bachelor of Law, with 42 courses
- Bachelor of History, with 42 courses
- Bachelor of Scientific and Technological Information and Library Management, with 38 courses
- Bachelor of Accounting and Finance, with 41 courses
- Bachelor of Economics, with 40 courses.

Educational Material

The main support for the Guided Courses is instructional print material:

- textbooks (the same ones used in face-to-face education)
- the syllabus, which contains the curriculum topics, a course outline, and course objectives
- exercise work books: some courses arrange these in order to carry out practical exercises.
- study guides; which include directions on how to study the courses independently, self-evaluation exercises, points regarding fundamental aspects of the course, and so on. These are prepared specifically for guided education.
- practical recommendations for studying the courses, which show in a concise form a series of methods through which the student can satisfactorily carry out independent study of the course. These are also written specifically for distance education courses. Other instructional materials are used, such as videotapes, audiotapes, and radio programs, all of them in an experimental form.

Two faculties, La Habana and Santiago de Cuba, have developed schemes for student orientation using videotapes. Today work is under way to spread their use to other centres in the country.

Learning Assessment

Assessment of learning in the Guided Courses is done through a final exam in each of the courses.

The exams assess the curriculum content of the course; they are in written form and require the student to be present at the place where the exam takes place. They last a maximum of four hours and are of the open book or essay type.

They are taken outside working hours to prevent interference with the student's regular work. This allows the use of university facilities during the weekend when their use is not so intense.

In every academic course there are three exam periods; they are held in February and March, May and June, and September and October. The student has the right to select freely which courses will be examined at each time or to distribute them at his/her convenience among the different exam times.

To be able to write the examination, students must apply for examination in the courses of their choice 30 days in advance of the examination date. In Cuba, a third of the initial enrolment applies for examination, and about 40% of those who sit the exams pass.

In its role as Managing Centre, The Universidad de la Habana prepares for each exam period the topics to be examined and corresponding guides for grading, which are distributed to the other Higher Education Centres in the territories and the provinces before the exam period. This

distribution is done under the most strict rules of control to protect the contents until the examination.

For the last few years, a new approach has been developing for preparing the examination questions and grading guides through a computerized system of questionnaires, which creates a question bank that allows the professor to make up the exams that will be used quickly.

Completion of Studies

The evaluation system has, as its final part, the State Exam. This constitutes the last evaluation activity; it consists of an examination of the student in front of a specialist group in which the contents of the basic professional subjects are assessed.

Through this modality, several hundreds of students have finished their studies in the different degrees offered.

Academic and Administrative Management Systems

The great volume of registration existing at different centres makes it impossible for the academic and administrative management to use manual systems efficiently. For this reason, since its creation, academic management has incorporated computerized procedures, which have allowed a more efficient use of the material and human resources and at the same time a considerable reduction in the costs of this type of course.

The management system designed includes four subsystems, each one of which involves a particular aspect of the academic activity and makes it possible to obtain updated information rapidly at the different stages of the course. They are:

- student control system
- system of course validation
- system for national control for the inventory of textbook and other bibliographic materials (Leading Centre).
- system for exam distribution to different centres of the country (Leading Centre).

Also, it is important to note that, in addition, there are other programs written in dBASE III, Turbo Pascal, and SUPERCAL-3 that are used in the administrative operations of the faculties and provide greater quality and efficiency in the work.

Perspectives

Despite the results achieved, it is recognized that there is much to be done regarding upgrading and developing this education modality, and we propose to pursue the following goals in the next years:

- to make efforts to continue to develop human resources in the techniques of Distance Education as well as in the domain and application of the actual teaching technology to our resources
- to add other degrees to the Distance Education spectrum
- to go deeper into curriculum design, with a view to revising and upgrading the study guides
- to develop graduate courses through Guided Courses
- to promote studies and research related to aspects of Distance Education, with the purpose of increasing and improving those areas that make it possible to increase quality of education
- to continue our in-depth analysis of the characteristics of those students who drop their courses and also of the causes that influenced their decision
- to analyze ways of improving the applied model of distance education by introducing teacher-student links according to the characteristics and resources of our centres, in a way that would make it possible to offer the students systematically greater attention and orientation
- to continue improving the use of support systems as a way to alleviate the insufficiencies of some written instructional materials and to reduce to a certain extent the isolation of the learning process for students in the Guided Courses
- to conduct comparative studies on dropouts, academic efficiency, instructional material, and other relevant topics with other Distance Education institutions.
- to study the possibility of developing Distance Education programs for senior citizens.

Finally, we believe that Distance Education in Cuba has become an ideal complement to our educational system, which has as a principle the equal opportunity for all Cuban citizens who want to have a higher education.