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# CUBA: CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES FOR UK HIGHER EDUCATION ENGAGEMENT

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**Action:**

For information

**Audience:**

Pro-Vice-Chancellors, Directors International  
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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

From 16–21 March 2017, a delegation of three Cuban Ministry of Higher Education and university officials met with UK universities, UK government, and education sector agencies. The overarching aim of the visit was to identify the level of interest in, and scope of opportunities for, new partnerships between Cuban and UK higher education sectors. Ultimately, the mission demonstrated a clear sense of enthusiasm and commitment from all sides for greater cooperation in HE and generated several ideas for follow-up. It was equally clear, however, that there is a need for greater coordination and support on the part of UK and Cuban agencies in order to translate these ideas into action.

This visit report opens with a summary of Cuban higher education, including the social and economic framework under which it operates, before providing a brief overview of the visit. It closes with an overview of current funding opportunities available for UK higher education institutions (HEIs) wishing to engage with Cuba. The delegation was funded by the British Embassy in Havana and organised in collaboration with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and the British Council, whose enthusiasm and support was fundamental to the success of the visit.

# OVERVIEW

- 1 In a 2014 report on international education, the World Bank concluded that ‘no Latin American school system today, except possibly Cuba’s, is very close to high standards, high academic talent, high or at least adequate compensation, and high professional autonomy that characterise the world’s most effective education systems’<sup>1</sup>. A number of international institutions including UNESCO and the IMF have reached similar conclusions around the quality of Cuba’s education system, particularly around the quality of teaching in the sector.
- 2 To date, a number of UK higher education institutions (HEIs) have established people-to-people links with the Cuban sector but there remains a noticeable gap in engagement at a system level. Moreover, any opportunities for collaboration are often capped by practical barriers – many of which can be traced back to wider bilateral relations with the US and EU whose policies in relation to Cuba (primarily around trade) have influenced the conditions for cooperation in higher education and research.
- 3 It is not insignificant, then, that in 2016 a British Foreign Secretary visited Cuba for the first time in nearly six decades to promote bilateral cooperation in a number of areas including higher education, energy, culture and financial and professional services. The delegation of Cuban Ministry of Higher Education and HEI officials to the UK in March 2017 sought to build on this symbolic visit and set the foundation for practical and mutually-beneficial partnerships between Cuba and the UK in higher education.
- 4 The mission was funded by the British Embassy in Havana and was led by Dr Aurora Fernandez (Vice-Minister, Ministry of Higher Education in Cuba). Additional delegates included Dr Maria Victoria Villavicencio (Director for International Relations, Ministry of Higher Education in Cuba) and Dr Adianez Taboada (Rector, Agrarian University of Havana).
- 5 This visit report opens with a summary of Cuban higher education (including the social and economic framework under which it sits) before providing a brief overview of the visit. It closes with an overview of current funding opportunities available for UK HEIs wishing to engage with the Cuban sector.
- 6 Ultimately, the mission demonstrated a very clear sense of enthusiasm and commitment from all sides for greater cooperation in higher education and generated several ideas for follow-up (particularly around facilitating research). It was equally clear, however, that there is a need for greater coordination and support on the part of UK and Cuban agencies, and particularly to identify sources of funding for collaborative research, in order to translate these ideas into action.

# CUBAN HIGHER EDUCATION

## Political & economic context

- 7 Following the revolution in 1959, Cuba nationalised all educational institutions and created a system operated entirely by government. Cuban education at all levels is entirely free (including higher education for domestic and international students alike) and remains firmly construed as a public good.
- 8 In regard to its economy, Cuba relies heavily on fuel and food imports and sustains a large goods trade deficit (goods exports totalled US\$3.6 billion in 2015, while imports were US\$11.7 billion)<sup>2</sup>. The Cuban Government highlights that a US economic, commercial and financial blockade of the island continues to hinder development and opportunities for international collaboration. In recent years, the government has initiated a gradual process of reform which has seen Cuba increase its exports of professional services, expand its tourism sector and heavily invest in biotechnology, agriculture and related fields.
- 9 Cuba's education system is strongly rooted in these wider political and economic efforts, as the government seeks to use education as a vehicle to generate self-sustaining growth. This is reflected in the country's R&D priorities and higher education curricula – both of which demonstrate a strategic focus on sustainable development and are being increasingly linked to practical/vocational work.

## Key statistics

- 10 There are 52 HEIs comprising approximately 100 undergraduate teaching programmes and more than 300 master's and PhD programmes. In regard to the makeup of HEIs, there are 51,432 professors and researchers, of which:
  - 55% are women
  - 30% are tenured or associate researchers
  - 40% are under 35 years old

## Policy reforms

- 11 Over the past five years, the Cuban government has launched a number of policy reforms across the higher education sector. As previously highlighted, these changes come amidst wider socioeconomic efforts to reduce the country's dependency on food imports (in favour of a more self-sustaining economy) and seek to bolster technical and vocational skills.
- 12 As of September 2015, the Cuban Ministry of Higher Education had implemented the following changes:
  - The establishment of Educación Superior no Universitaria (TVET); a new education system aimed at boosting skilled labour
  - Facilitating admission to night courses and distance education
  - Shortening undergraduate degrees to four years
  - Introducing a new legal framework to support professional training
  - Establishing new English language requirements (university students must demonstrate proficiency before graduation)

## International engagement

- 13 Cuba's international engagement in higher education pertains mostly to research projects and inbound mobility to Cuban universities (according to UNESCO figures, Cuba hosts 12 times the number of students it sends abroad, with its 1,800 outbound students comparing to nearly 23,000 students hosted in 2012 – none of whom paid any tuition fees<sup>3</sup>).
- 14 In regards to R&D, Cuba participates in over 300 academic and scientific networks and over 400 scientific research projects. Leading international partners in this area include Spain, Portugal, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy and Switzerland, with funding mainly derived from European sources such as the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), the Flemish Inter-university Council (VLIR-UOS) and the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD).

- 15 Research priorities and international cooperation in Cuba strongly reflect national development objectives and needs. International collaboration is particularly sought in the following areas:
- Agriculture, agroindustry, food chain
  - English as a second language and teacher training
  - Distance learning
  - Renewable energy
  - Environment, climate change, use of water
  - Informatics and Telecommunications
  - Biotechnology, Pharmaceuticals, biomedicine
  - Housing, construction

## CUBA-UK INBOUND MISSION (MARCH 2017)

- 16 From 16–21 March 2017, Cuban Ministry of Higher Education and HEI officials met with UK universities and sector agencies to identify the current appetite for UK-Cuba bilateral collaboration in higher education as well as the present and potential opportunities across the sector.
- 17 The programme included discussions with the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), the Higher Education Academy (HEA), the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU), the British Council and UUKi. The visit also included ministerial-level discussions with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Embassy of Cuba in the UK.
- 18 In a reciprocal bid for UK stakeholders to better understand Cuban higher education, Dr Aurora Fernandez (Vice-Minister of the Cuban Ministry of Higher Education) led a presentation on the current challenges and opportunities for collaboration in Cuban higher education to a group of approximately 70 UK HEI representatives.
- 19 Two principal themes emerged from this session. The first was that most UK university attendees were clearly interested in working with the Cuban higher education sector, with some having already established links at an informal institutional level.
- 20 The second revolved around the practical barriers to cooperation, with lack of funding (particularly for collaborative research) cited as one of the main obstacles. UK participants also highlighted a lack of centralised support for Cuban and UK universities, and stressed that universities on both sides would benefit from a systems-level platform to enable match-making researchers and institutions.
- 21 Attendees highlighted that the British Council might have capacity to play a role here, citing the organisation's 'Researcher Links' initiative<sup>4</sup> as a potential model to consider for application in Cuba. The scheme enables early-career researchers across selected partner countries to form international connections through (fully-funded) workshops and travel grants.
- 22 Several attendees also put forward the idea of developing trilateral or multilateral partnerships between Cuba, the UK and third countries elsewhere in Latin America (particularly where both the UK and Cuba have strong prior connections in higher education and research eg Colombia and Mexico) so as to take advantage of research or other funding resources active in these third countries as a route to Cuba-UK cooperation.



# CURRENT FUNDING STREAMS

## Cuba Programme Funds

<sup>23</sup> The British Embassy in Cuba has been provisionally allocated programme funds by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to support technical assistance work between the UK and Cuba in a number of priority areas. The funds – which are allocated on a yearly basis – form a small but integral part of the UK's total commitment to Official Development Assistance (ODA).

<sup>24</sup> Bids can range from under £10,000 to more than £80,000 and must pertain to one or more of the themes below:

- Higher education and English language
- Financial and professional services
- Public procurement and renewable energy
- Biotech, pharmaceuticals and tackling global health threats

<sup>25</sup> **To note the bidding process for UK financial year 2017-2018 is now closed. Members are advised to refer to the British Embassy website<sup>5</sup> and/or contact [ukincuba@fco.gov.uk](mailto:ukincuba@fco.gov.uk) for details around the scheme and awareness of future opportunities.**

## Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF)

<sup>26</sup> The Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) is a £1.5 billion UK government fund to support cutting-edge research that addresses the challenges faced by developing countries through:

- Challenge-led disciplinary and interdisciplinary research
- Strengthening capacity for research and innovation within both the UK and developing countries
- Providing an agile response to emergencies where there is an urgent research need

<sup>27</sup> GCRF is administered through delivery partners including the Research Councils and national academies. While proposals must be led by a UK principal investigator, all countries on the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) list are eligible for inclusion, including Cuba.

<sup>28</sup> **Further information on the GCRF is available on the RCUK website<sup>6</sup>.**

## Chevening Scholarship

<sup>29</sup> Chevening Scholarships enable international students to pursue a fully-funded one-year master's at any UK university. The scheme is funded by FCO and subsidises visa and tuition fees, a monthly stipend, travel costs to and from the UK, and an arrival and homeward departure allowance.

<sup>30</sup> **The next application cycle will open in August 2017 – further information is available on the Chevening website<sup>7</sup>.**

## References

1. Brown & Luque, *Great Teachers: How to Raise Student Learning in Latin America and the Caribbean*, Washington, D.C., World Bank Group, 2014
2. <http://country.eiu.com/article.aspx?articleid=1965063980&Country=Cuba&topic=Summary&subtopic=Fact+sheet>
3. <http://www.uis.unesco.org/Education/Pages/international-student-flow-viz.aspx>
4. Further information on the programme is available here: <https://www.britishcouncil.org/education/science/researcher-links>
5. <https://www.gov.uk/government/world-location-news/british-embassy-in-havana-calls-for-project-bids-for-financial-year-20172018>
6. <http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/funding/gcrf/>
7. <http://www.chevening.org/cuba>