

# EDUCATION OF OLDER ADULTS IN CUBA: UNIVERSITY CHAIR FOR OLDER ADULTS IN ISLA DE LA JUVENTUD

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**ABSTRACT:** This research article discusses and analyzes an education program for older adults in Isla de la Juventud, Cuba, called the Cátedra Universitaria del Adulto Mayor (University Chair for Older Adults). Our interest in studying this program for older adults stems from the peculiarity of its designation as a university chair and, simultaneously, being the education model for older adults in Cuba. We used a qualitative approach, combining methods to obtain data through observations, interviews, documents examination, personal experiences, and narratives to explore the program's goals, nature, possibilities, and limitations. We found that the program is highly valued in raising older adults' self-esteem and their success in the program, raising awareness of the significance of caring for older adults. Research by Cuban academics on the university chair for older adults also coincides with these outcomes. The study found that a factor affecting older adults in Cuba is that perhaps this population segment is most affected by inflation and the current economic crisis. The current situation in the country poses a significant challenge to educating older adults through the Chair, considering that education coverage through universities is limited compared to the number of older adults in the country. Furthermore, older adults have limited time and resources due to their daily struggle to obtain food and meet the most basic needs for everyday living.

**Keywords:** older adults, Cuba, education models

In Cuba, there is a contrasting panorama; on one side, the touristic attributes of lovely beaches in Varadero, the colonial buildings of Havana, and the legendary flavors of tobacco and rum. On the other side, a lesser-known narrative unfolds — one that revolves around the achievements of Cuba in the massification of education, like the campaign of alphabetization and the lesser-known of university programs for educating older adults and their daily life struggles. The authors aim to present a picture of older adults' education in Cuba through various methods, examination of documents, interviews with open-ended questions, personal interviews, and narratives.

Through this multidimensional exploration, we sought to understand the University Chair for Older Adults that aims to foster personal growth and empower older adults, furthermore, the difficulties and challenges those older adults face in the present living conditions in Cuba. To unravel the details of this adult education program in Cuba, we analyze documents that shed light on educational policies and frameworks. The examination of these materials provided a theoretical framework to contextualize findings.

The philosophy of the Cuban government is expressed officially as a commitment to creating an inclusive and accessible adult education system that addresses the needs of all its citizens.

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Examining the mission and role of higher education in Cuba is important. Particularly the universities since they are part of a set of educational institutions framed in the perspective of a state that defines itself as socialist and that only public education exists.

The Cuban Revolution educational policy is aimed at providing comprehensive training for university graduates as revolutionary professionals. However, the collapse of the socialist bloc and USSR and the US government's economic and ideological aggression led to economic and social transformations in Cuba that contradicted socialist principles. Consequently, this led to losing values and influenced university professors and students. An integrated approach to education and political-ideological work was adopted to address this, emphasizing academic excellence and considering curricular, university extension, and socio-political dimensions. (Pulgarón Ramos, 2009).

### **Demographic Context**

In 2019, 20.8% of Cuban women and men were 60 years or older; at the end of 2022, it was 22.3%, according to the National Office of Statistics and Information (ONEI). These numbers give a rounded estimate of a population of older adults of about 2,500,000. In its recent report, *The Aging of the Population. Cuba and its territories*, May 2023 edition, the ONEI maintain that the aging of its population is the foremost challenge for Cuba in the demographic (Fariñas Acosta, 2023).

This increase in the proportion of older adults to the rest of the population is associated not only with an increase in the proportion of older adults but also with a decrease in the proportion of children and young between 0 and 14 years old, which impacts the "economy, the family, services, the replacement of human capital, social security and the high costs of medical and epidemiological care "adds Fariñas Acosta (2023).

### **The Cuban Economic Context**

At the beginning of 2021, an economic crisis marked Cuban society until today. The problem manifests itself in significant price increases in goods, a sharp increase in inflation, and a severe shortage of food and medicine (Frank, 2022). As of May 2023, the official inflation rate of Cuba is 45.48% (Trading Economics, n.d.).

The Cuban government attributes the current economic crisis to the decades-old U.S. trade embargo against Cuba, which the Trump administration tightened. It also attributes it to the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic (EcuRed, n.d.).

According to Arias Rivera (2021), the Helms-Burton Act in 1996 strengthened the blockade, while federal budget laws and the Trade Sanctions Reform and Export Enhancement Act of 2000 incorporated additional sanctions. The Torricelli Act codified the blockade's prohibitions for the first time in 1992, making it extraterritorial. It included sanctions on third nations with U.S. company subsidiaries and ships trading with Cuba. There were 243 actions taken against Cuba by the administration, including the suspension of company, ship travel, and U.S. airline flights to the entire island, except for

Havana; cancellation of consular services in Cuba and their location in third countries; obstruction of banking transactions; a first restriction, then a cessation, of (private) citizen bank transfers, followed by the subsequent closure of the operations of the Western Union company.

The economic and financial effects of geographic relocation of trade include income loss, decline in production, food scarcity, access to advanced technologies, population service reduction, economic and financial effects, emigration, and death of those denied access to healthcare. These damages include the scarcity of essential resources, difficulty accessing cutting-edge technologies, and impact on population services. (Arias Rivera, 2021).

Cuba's economy has encountered several difficulties due to the embargo, including limited access to technology, raw materials, and foreign investments. The embargo limits trade and financial transactions between the two countries, making it challenging for Cuba to access the vast U.S. market and obtain necessary resources and investments (EcuRed, n.d.).

A scholar, Dr. Leo Grande, said, "For sixty years, the economic embargo has failed to achieve any of its stated policy goals while exacting a high human cost, stifling the development of the Cuban economy and making daily life harder for Cuban families (Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), 2022)."

### **Criticism of Economic Management**

Critics of Cuban government economic policies argue that the Cuban embargo, imposed by the United States since the 1960s, has significantly impacted the country's economy. The blockade restricts trade and financial transactions between the two nations, making it difficult for Cuba to access the vast U.S. market and obtain vital resources and investments. As a result, the Cuban economy has faced various challenges, including limited access to technology, raw materials, and foreign investments.

However, they point out that the crisis is not only due to the embargo but also to the Cuban government's mismanagement of the economy. They argue that the Cuban government's poor management of the economy has led to inflation, food, and fuel shortages. Explaining that the centrally planned economy has not adapted well to market dynamics, resulting in inefficiencies, lack of innovation, and slow response to changing economic conditions. The Cuban economy is heavily dependent on industries like agriculture and tourism, making it vulnerable to external shocks like the COVID-19 pandemic, negatively impacting travel and tourism (Mesa Lago, 2023).

Mesa Lago (2023) states that Cuba's restrictive policies towards private enterprises and foreign investments have hindered the growth of a vibrant private sector that could contribute to economic resilience and job creation. For example, state-owned enterprises have been plagued by inefficiencies, mismanagement, and corruption, leading to a lack of productivity and effectiveness in many sectors. Cuba's fixed exchange rates and dual currency have hampered competition and created economic distortions.

In synthesis, critics of the Cuban government's economic policies acknowledge the detrimental impact of the U.S. embargo on the Cuban economy. However, they assert that the current inflation, food, and fuel shortages are also the result of poor economic management by the Cuban government, including centralized planning, limited private enterprise, and insufficient reforms to adapt to changing global economic conditions.

### **University Chair for Older Adults**

Cuba currently has 50 universities, 113 specialties, and almost half its population holds a higher education degree, according to Jose Ramon Saborido, the country's minister of higher education (Guillen, 2019).

Today, over 2 million older adults are in Cuba, representing 20.8% of the population. Estimates show that between 2025 and 2030, this age group will exceed three million and represent more than 30% of the Cuban population (*Cuba en Datos: Población Cubana Decece y Envejece*, 2022).

In Cuba, the universities of older adults program is known as University Chairs of the Older Adult (CUAM). Today they are formed by multidisciplinary groups with the objectives of research, project development, and gerontological training, as well as the development and direction in each province of the universities of the older adult. Today the essential work of the Chair of the older adult is the elaboration and development of the education of the older adult as an activity of university extension (Orosa Fraiz, 2020).

The University Chair of the Older Adult in Cuba was founded in 2000 in the Faculty of Psychology of the University of Havana with the support of the Central de Trabajadores de Cuba and the Asociación de Pedagogos de Cuba. It has its roots in the University of the Third Age movement (Aldama-Torreblanca, 2021). The University of the Third Age Movement was founded by Professor Vellas in 1973 at the University of Toulouse in France (Chamahiana, 2006). In the 1990s, this movement spread to several Latin American countries, such as Argentina, Chile, Costa Rica, and Ecuador. Chile, Costa Rica, and Ecuador, among others. According to Teresa Orosa Fraiz, the Chairs of the Older Adult "constitute the Cuban denomination of the so-called university programs, with an extensionist character and community existence, advised by each center of higher education in the country. " (2020, p.2).

Quiala-Batista et al. (2020) state that Cuban University has three main components: teaching-methodological, scientific, and extension. The Chair of the Older Adult (CUAM) is one of how the University relates to the region in the practice of extension work, through which specialists from different areas of knowledge contribute to cultural development, scientific and technical updating, and social continuity to the older adult participants of the experience.

The program has classrooms in urban and rural areas. It operates on university premises, cultural centers, local museums, health areas, agricultural cooperatives, and schools, among other community places. According to data from the Ministry of Higher

Education, there are 19 provincial Chairs for Older adults and more than 100,000 graduates nationally (Orosa Fraiz, 2020).

Orosa Fraiz (2020) explains that the system has three components. The first one is the basic course with a duration of one year that must be completed, directed to older adults today through modules. The second component today consists of continuity courses of great thematic diversity. It is also aimed at older adults who have graduated from the basic course. The third component is training and postgraduate courses in gerontology and related subjects aimed at people who participate as teachers in educating older adults.

Participation is voluntary, but a one-year introductory course is required, consisting of six modules: Propaedeutic; Human Development, a new approach; Education and health promotion; Social Security in Cuba; Contemporary Culture and Efficient Organization of Free Time. Once the older adults graduate from the basic course, they are expected to become multipliers. From the first year onwards, continuity courses are offered to graduates focused on lifelong education (Quiala Batista et al., 2020).

Module 1	Propaedeutic
Module 2	Human development, a new approach
Module 3	Health prevention
Module 4	Social Security in Cuba
Module 5	Contemporary Culture
Module 6	Efficient Organization of Free Time

Note: Upon graduation from the one-year course, they remain on continuity courses.

At the University of Isla de la Juventud, participants select supplemental courses based on their preferences and requirements. Some classes or presentations the participants have chosen include Handicrafts, Computers, Film Appreciation, Wine Culture, Nutrition, Popular, and Traditional Culture, Diseases in the Older Adult, Traditional Dances, Cultivation of Breadfruit and its Qualities, Medicinal Plants, and Vinegar Making. R. P. Cedeño (personal communication, May 26, 2023).

Quiala Batista et al. (2020) developed a didactic alternative called *La Nieve de los Años*. [The Snow of the Years] aimed to increase the participation of older adults in the Cueto municipality in the Holguin province who belong to the University Chair of Older Adults. Providing cultural activities (handicraft workshops, plastic arts, literature, theater, dance); sports (gymnastics, board games, tournaments); health talks, sex education, and hygiene; linking with circles of interest and municipality associations.

## **Addressing Some Questions About the Program**

### **Attracting New Participants**

We discussed several concerns regarding the program, including how to attract participants, which the coauthor addressed. R.P. Cedeño (personal conversation May 25, 2023).

The method of attracting recruits is through promotion on radio and television. Graduates or continuing students who have already gone through the basic course tell their friends and neighbors about their experiences in the class. It is a word-of-mouth transmission. In addition, those who continue and do handicrafts make exhibitions in the galleries and produce presentations in the houses of culture. People come to see, are interested, and ask what the Chair offers.

### **Enrollment**

There is only one University and only one Chair for older adults. Among the reasons for the low enrollment, we can mention that some do not know about it, lack of interest, others retire and dedicate themselves to taking care of the grandchildren, others run errands or do not want to leave the house, some are in the nursing home, others are sick or bedridden. R.P/ Cedeño (personal conversation May 25, 2023)

### **Interviews with Older Adults from the Cátedra Universitaria del Adulto Mayor**

Purposeful sampling was utilized to select the interview participants. This technique is primarily used in qualitative research to efficiently identify and select information-rich cases to use limited resources (Patton, 2002). Includes finding and choosing individuals or groups who are primarily well-informed about the issues to be studied (Creswell, 2013).

Individual interviews with fifteen older adults from the Cátedra Universitaria de la Isla de la Juventud were conducted on June 16, 2023, at the Julio Antonio Mella Municipal Library. The data from the interviews is presented as an illustration to point out the participants' opinions on specific aspects of the education program for older adults in the Cuban context.

#### **Questions:**

1. How did you get involved in the older adult chair group? Describe the things that got you involved.
2. Tell me about your positive and negative experiences.
3. Looking back on your experiences, how do you think they influenced your life?
4. Think about the things you have learned. Describe the things that others have learned from you.
5. What do you think is the legacy of your experience and learning for the next generation?
6. What are the situations of daily life that most affect the older adult on the Isle of Youth?
7. How do you think more older adults can be integrated into the activities?

## **Regarding Motivation for Involvement**

An inner motivation, an unmet need, awakens a desire channeled by having information about activities in the community aimed at older adults. Emilia described how she gets involved:

While going through a trying time—having been widowed and feeling incredibly lonely—I saw the chairwoman on a program in the Isla Visión TV channel [Isla de la Juventud] explaining what the Chair consisted of and when and where it would start, and I invited a neighbor to accompany me.

Loneliness and having the closest family member in distant places on the island of Cuba are a factor that also motivates participation in the Chair, as Teresita pointed out:

In the Chair group, I interact with other people; it allows me to continue learning and support to have a reason to live since the loneliness is overwhelming.

## **Positive and negative experiences.**

Having new friendships, having close ties among the members stands out as an achievement of the seniors' Chair. For Ramona, this is an unexpected but very positive result from her point of view.

For me, meeting new friends has been a blessing. It is like we were a family, and I have learned many new things. The meetings and talks with doctors from different specialties were very valuable. I feel that I am heard when I speak my criteria.

The negative experiences are related to the lack of resources and a fixed meeting location. Emilia says:

For each group meeting, you have to go to a different place, and that causes many difficulties since transportation in Cuba is very poor, and the arrangements to be made beforehand change with the meeting place,

## **Influence of Chair of Older Adults**

In Norma's opinion, a very important factor is the spiritual aspect she has found in belonging to the Chair for older adults. She highlights this aspect as a very positive influence in her life.

I have a son who is a prisoner and felt isolated, and here I have found spiritual support and made new friends. I can count on them at any given time.

Francisca says that feeling useful positively influences her life and that she is not there only to care for the grandchildren and run errands. Feeling valuable in herself recognizes her worth as a human being.

I feel more valuable and do not just go to the bodega to buy bread or care for grandchildren. My eating habits and daily life have improved, and I have been more communicative in my area of residence. I talk to the neighbors about the Chair, I implement time better, and my character has changed. I have learned to value myself in the social and family environment.

### **Learning**

Sofia expresses what seem to be unintended consequences of her participation. Even though the Chair conducts multiple activities of talks, workshops, and conferences ranging from medicine to crafts, Sofia expresses what seem to be unintended consequences of her participation.

I have learned to be calmer when difficulties arise in my life. I have also learned how to communicate more and express myself more assertively. To be optimistic, to live, to be patient, to be cheerful, to work with others, to be united, and to share.

### **Legacy for Next Generations**

Juanita summarizes the legacy to the next generations in transmitting the skills of living well in the community and lifelong learning.

The experiences and motivation I have acquired should be transmitted to children and grandchildren; to try to communicate to the next generations because studying is fundamental, and what one learns is to develop knowledge and a more just society. The legacy I transmit is that learning here does not cost anything, regardless of age or sex, to continue learning.

### **Daily Life Situations Most Affect Older People on the Isla de la Juventud.**

Ramona summarizes what situations affect the older adults in Isla de La Juventud and, ultimately, in Cuba:

There are long lines every day to buy food or medicine. With the checkbook [retirement pension], there is not enough to pay for a tricycle to move within the city from one place to another. Our daily lives are affected by living conditions, the few activities we can attend due to the salary, transportation, medicines, food shortage, the lack of medical specialists in one treatment area, and the high prices of products.

### **Integrating More Older Adults**

Emilia summarized some things that can help attract more people:



Increasing television advertising, explaining and describing activities of the Chair, and bringing up the topic with friends and neighbors.

### **Findings and Discussion**

Through this research on the University Chair of Older Adults Education, we understood the nature of the program as a university extension program for educating older adults that universities in Cuba manage. In the case of the Isla de la Juventud program, we had the opportunity to know its achievements, challenges, and difficulties. Isla de la Juventud participants demonstrate personal success in developing skills to face aging. However, Cuba's societal and economic problems impact older adults' participation in the program. The study highlights the program's value in raising self-esteem, raising awareness of the importance of caring for older adults, and overcoming stereotypes to give them respect in the community and society. Studies carried out by Cuban academic researchers like Pérez Sanchez et al. (2023) also affirm these aspects as achievements of the implementation of the Cátedra Universitaria del Adulto Mayor program.

The older adult population in Cuba has been facing significant challenges due to the economy's deterioration. Foreign currency stores only sell in MLC (freely convertible currency), and the person must recharge the bank cards in US dollars. Senior citizens in these stores face high food prices for their income, with pensions ranging from 1500 to 1800 Cuban pesos (CUP). The exchange rate has climbed to 240 CUP for one dollar. The devaluation of the Cuban peso against the dollar has led to generalized shortages, making it difficult for older adults to cover their basic needs. Food items, such as meat and dietary staples, are often overpriced, making it difficult for older adults to survive on their income. The scarcity of Cuban pesos has recently obliged older adults to wait in line for long hours, and the government has ordered them to perform transactions online with digital applications. It affects mostly older adults who do not have cell phones and do not have the money to buy one.

Although it is impossible to obtain official data on poverty in Cuba, research has shown that it has risen over the past ten years for a variety of reasons and that the poorest people are typically retired seniors, household heads, single mothers, and those who do not receive remittances within these groups (Acosta, 2017).

How can the University Chair of Older Adults address the education of an expanding older adult population within the hierarchical structure of universities? How to educate older adults who must devote most of their time to finding food to eat daily? How does scarcity affect their health and well-being? These are some pressing issues and questions for future research.

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