CHERPE
Cuban Higher Education Reform: a Policy Ethnography

Approaching the gap

Since 1959, education has been one of the most prominent areas of the Cuban Revolution. The achievements of Cuban education, internationally recognised, have impacted the country's cultural, social, and economic transformation. Despite the profound reforms carried out at all educational levels since 1959, higher education has been the focus of even more extensive reforms from 2000 onwards. Major causes for rethinking Cuban higher education were, first, the severe economic crisis of the 1990s, known in Cuba as the *Special Period*, in which the Cuban nation underwent a far-reaching economic and social reshaping (Espina, 2008). Second, by 2000, there were high youth-unemployment rates (Smith, 2016), made worse by higher education enrolment policies, which generated elitism (Almeida, 2019). In this context, the so-called **Third Education Revolution** was enacted in Cuba.

CHERPE starts from this landmark Third Educational Revolution. Through ethnographic research, the project aims to show the role of university actors in shaping higher education on the ground in one Cuban university. Academic education studies (Carnoy et al., 2007; Espina, 2007; Tejuca et al., 2017) have focused **on the state's role and regulations** in Cuban educational achievements or just analysed the policy documents themselves, or their impacts based on figures. Although there is a large body of research on higher education, comparatively few studies focus on the workings of higher education policy. The **gap** is even wider regarding studies addressing an anthropological approach, which is practically non-existent in the Cuban education context.

CHERPE **will answer this** main **question: How have the Cuban centralised higher education policy documents been translated on the ground from 2000 onwards?** Through my previous PhD thesis, contextualised at one Cuban secondary school and focused on teachers' professional trajectories, I noticed there is not a direct relationship between policy documents and teachers' practices. Indeed, I described how teachers both enact and contest

policy documents through their practices. **It enabled me to rethink Cuban education policies overall**. At the same time, this research positioned me at the forefront of both the anthropology of education and the anthropology of policy fields in which my supervisor, Professor Wright, has been a pioneer. Based on my PhD's findings, I expect university actors might actively engage in the implementation of education policies and, at the same time, contest them. This trend can also be observed in studies carried out by my supervisor and her partner researchers in European contexts (Wright, 2019a).

The **overarching objective of CHERPE is to describe how Cuba's centralised higher education policy documents are translated on the ground at the University of Holguin.** This involves asking what university actors do in the name of policies. More specifically, it addresses the following **specific research objectives** (SRO):

1. To contextualise Cuban higher education in the current Cuban frame.
2. To analyse Cuban higher education policy documents on the universalization of higher education, the university integration, and the shortening of bachelor programmes.
3. To describe the organisational (re)configurations of the University of Holguin from 2000 onward.
4. To describe how university actors set up their own practices in dialogical relationships with education policy documents and their socio-cultural contexts of practice.

As the main **innovative aspects** of CHERPE, I mention a) a pioneering theoretical and methodological contribution to both Cuban higher education policy studies and a new field of anthropology of education in Cuba; b) the strengthening of the anthropology of policy field through a piece of research focused on a unique educational context exhibiting exceptional achievements under unfavourable economic conditions; c) the historical moment of generational shift at the national government level and a new ethnographically grounded knowledge about how Cuban higher education policies are translated into practices. The most significant **expected impacts** of CHERPE will be associated with 1) the development of Cuban higher education studies and the anthropology of education and policy fields; 2) the improvement of my career by developing my research skills and enhancing my employability and competitiveness; 3) the enlargement of my own international the networks and extending those of the Centre for Higher Education Futures (CHEF) into Latin America.

The state-of-the-art: Cuban higher education policy studies and anthropology of policy

CHERPE sets up an interdisciplinary dialogue between Cuban higher education policy studies and anthropology of policy. I describe the state-of-the-art regarding these two fields below.

- *Cuban higher education policy studies*

As I described through my PhD research focused on school and social transformation after 1959, the Revolutionary Government discursively positioned itself as the principal actor of social transformation, the key organising principle of Cuban society, and the precept from which social life took place. One of the most relevant consequences was the overvaluing of the role of the bureaucratic apparatus and the undervaluing of the role played by educational actors on the ground. The top-down and authoritative fashion which characterises Cuban education policy became normalised (Cordovés, 2017). However, despite their authoritative appearance, policy documents cannot enact a definitive set of changes on the ground. Policies and reforms give rise to new events involving many different actors – from students to lecturers and university leaders as well as policymakers – who form new relationships and establish new practices, often in surprising ways. CHERPE seeks to **uncover how policy documents have generated new constellations of events, relationships, practices, and powers, leading to unforeseen outcomes on the ground.**

Concerning the transformation of Cuban higher education from 2000 onwards, two periods can be preliminarily identified: a) the first one up to 2008, in which policies were orientated towards equity and social justice and the flagship was the **Universalisation of higher education;** b) in the second period from 2008 to the present higher education policies have been pragmatically-oriented (García-Chediak & Quintana, 2022), and policies regarding **university enrolment**, the **integration of universities (transforming three universities into a single one**), and the shortened **length of all bachelor programmes** have been implemented to fit higher education with economic reforms. I understand the reshaping of Cuban higher education from 2000 onwards as part of a large-scale process of transformation in which university actors (and the education sector as a whole) have been actively involved. Fidel Castro's administration ended after 49 years of governing the country and Raul Castro's administration [2008] saw the drive for economic reform. In 2018, the first president who does not belong to the so-called historical generation of the Cuban Revolution was elected and a new constitution was enacted in 2019.

Cuban education policy has been studied from several approaches. Sociology and other social sciences, economics, psychology, and pedagogy are the fields that hosted most of the studies I have reviewed. Except for a few pieces of research (Espina, 2007; Blum, 2011b; Tejuca et al., 2017), most analyses rely on global figures and approaches to Cuban education without examining in-depth how such education policies are implemented on the ground, as experienced by university actors. Most existing research follows the logic embedded in the policy documents and examines the outputs or results that the regulations were expected to

produce. Another trend concerns the discursive analysis of policy documents to show what changes in higher education were expected and what was conveyed as the right ways for acting. These approaches aligned with the still predominant linear policy framework, from which ethnographic studies are missing along with non-homogenising analyses regarding gender, race or other diversity aspects. **The lack of ethnographic studies on Cuban higher education policies is a gap I aim to address and fill.** Through CHERPE, I **aim to contribute to developing Cuban higher education studies by addressing anthropological approaches to education and policy**.

In my PhD research on teachers' professional trajectories (Cordovés, 2017), I argued that educational policies truly only come to life when they engage in particular relationships: between colleagues, between teachers and a particular school's culture, between teachers and students, between teachers and parents, and between teachers and managers. Despite the top-down and authoritative character shown by Cuban educational policies, my findings showed this is a framework in which we must look beyond what is explicit, beyond what should be, in order to understand it from other angles, from other voices. Taking this landscape into account, CHERPE seeks **what has been left out in the analyses of Cuban higher education policy.**

- *Anthropology of policy*

CHERPE is framed in the anthropology of policy field and takes an interdisciplinary approach based on a dialogue between the anthropology of education and HE studies. The field of anthropology of policy itself has grown via interdisciplinary practices. Although policy research has a broad tradition in several disciplines, it is still dominated by a linear model that (Shore & Wright, 2011) consists of analysing the problem, selecting a rational response (from among various options), implementing the chosen response, evaluating the desired outcomes, and revising the policy.

Policy documents often assume that norms and regulations 'trickle down' through organisations to their implementation on the ground or they present policy as "a mere tool that serves to unite means and ends or bridge the gap between goals and their execution –in short, a legal-rational way of getting things done" (Wedel et al., 2005, p. 37). This logic implicitly assumes roles for the different actors. Thus, on the ground, actors must implement the approved provisions. "Some evaluation studies endorse this view, by using the goals of policymakers as a normative baseline against which to read off the changes made to organisations and the

'reactions' of employees and clients" (Wright, 2019a, p. 12). **That is an authoritative view of policy which I intend to contest through CHERPE.**

In fact, the anthropological approach endeavours to deconstruct this dominant view that casts policy as simply instrumental governmental tools. The anthropological debates on policy do not recognise as a key question "what policy is?", rather they are interested in disclosing the constellation of emergencies or changes that policy might produce, including contestation processes. Instead, as a polysemous concept, policy is treated as "a word that can be coded and decoded to convey very ambiguous messages". The pivot question would therefore be "what do people do in the name of policy?" (Wedel et al., 2005, p. 37). This brings into the debate a view of policy concerning power(s). Through policy, people are constructed as objects of power (Wedel & Feldman, 2005), people and problems are classified, and new categories of individuals are actively created. Policies, thus, "are actants that have agency and that change as they enter into relations with actors, objects and institutions in new domains" (Shore & Wright, 2011, p. 20). Then, policy enters into (or creates) dialogical relationships with those actors, those institutions, and those objects which act in the name of the policy. Through these dialogical relationships, policies can be contested and they "are reinterpreted as they travel across cultural boundaries" (Shore & Wright, 2011, p. 20), as "a messy process" (Wright, 2019b, p. 26).

In this light, the anthropology of the policy field implies a "considerable potential to pioneer theoretical and methodological innovations in the discipline" (Wedel & Feldman, 2005, p. 2). Hence, the policy field needs to be reconceptualised 'as a site of ethnographic inquiry', from which policies are not limited to texts as forces that mechanically shape practices, nor can they be analysed only through their effects (Shore & Wright, 2011). By addressing an anthropological approach of policy and higher education studies, policies can be read "as windows onto political processes in which actors, agents, concepts and technologies interact in different sites, creating or consolidating new rationalities of governance and regimes of knowledge and power" (Wright & Reinhold, 2011, p. 2). This approach highlights the relevance of recognising both the **agency of policy documents** and the **agency of individuals and communities** (Shore, 2012).

Thus, this approach focuses on the ways in which policy documents are translated, implemented and contested into actions. In other words, it enables researchers to take "a democratic view of policy as a site where many diverse actors and organisations can potentially be actively involved in contested processes of change" (Wright & Reinhold, 2011, p 26).

CHERPE **will be a piece of research pioneered by addressing the anthropological approach of policy and higher education in the Cuban higher education studies field.**

Overall methodology

Historically the Cuban Government has positioned itself as the (central) subject of education actions, echoing the 'authoritative instrumentalism' criticised by Shore & Wright (2011) since it highlights the rational authority and the bureaucratic actions in the policy implementation. What has been systematically produced is the belief that the Revolution draws up, creates the conditions for, and makes possible social transformation just as planned. It produces a fiction that makes any analysis of state-related issues harder to carry out because this linear rationalism is deeply embedded in subjective structures (Bourdieu, 2012). Thus, it seems the transformations foreseen in public speeches, norms, regulations and documents come to life following the authorised pathways and by legitimised actors. Therefore, linear rationalism hinders any critical approaches to the policy enactment procedure, making it harder to identify other actors who can engage with policies in surprising ways and enact them in different forms through contestation or unexpected relationships.

To achieve the overarching objective and overcome the described challenge, CHERPE will adopt the strategy *studying through* developed by Wright and Reinholdt (2011) within the anthropology of policy field(Wright, 2019b)**.** Three main elements shape *studying through*. **Firstly**, it implies a multi-sited ethnography based on a notion of the field that is wider than the policy-makers and also encompasses the different actors who are involved in enacting the policy. In this case, the people and organisations involved in negotiating the Third Education Revolution are part of the ethnography, but so are university leaders, academics and students who are involved in interpreting, negotiating and even contesting the policy and actually transforming the everyday educational practices that constitute the enactment of the policy on the ground. The University of Holguin (UHo) is the key site for studying the involvement of leaders, academics and students in this process of transformation. This site is chosen because I am already familiar with this organisation and have collaborative relationships with leaders and teachers. **Secondly**, the research strategy is to follow events as they move between sites. Changes may be initiated not only 'top-down' by policymakers but also come from the activities of students, the educational aims of academics, or the institutional ambitions of leaders. It is unpredictable which initiatives will be taken up by other actors in the field. Then, following events across time and space, it is possible to analyse how transformations come about. **Thirdly,** political and epistemological reflexivity is involved, "that is, an awareness of

the wider historical and political context in which actors and events are framed, and an analytical openness not only to the conditions that have produced the present but to what the present is producing" (Wright & Reinhold, 2011, p. 102). By using the methodology of *studying through*, CHERPE will not only **describe how policy documents are translated on the ground but also explore how major transformations in the concept and practice of higher education come about.** This goes beyond the state-of-the-art in Cuban higher education studies and advances the anthropology of policy overall.

Studying through will use the following four **research methods**: documentary analysis, interviews, participant observation and focus groups. These cross-cutting methods will produce valuable data for approaching the related WPs, that is for analysing the political context and reform policies of Cuban higher education, understanding the organisation and institutional strategies of UHo and following the activities of leaders, academics and students. Through those data, it will be possible to follow what happened across time and ethnographic sites and observe how managers, academics and staff engaged, complied with, contested, or ignored the enacted policies. The methods will complement each other by providing strength to the data while identifying the diversity of relationships, practices and understandings that came to life. Data gathering itself will not ask for any participant's personal data. However, their voluntary participation will be confirmed by signing an informed consent for which personal data needs to be collected. In addition, considering CHERPE is focused on an organisation, it makes further anonymisation hard. Thus, informed consent will ask for people's preferences regarding anonymisation, pseudonymisation or the use of their real name.

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