

# Higher education cooperation for sustainable development between

## Cuba

## and Flanders (Belgium)

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Cuba is one of the key partner countries of VLIR-UOS. From 2003 to 2023 VLIR-UOS spent nearly € 28 millions in cooperation with Cuba, including long-term Institutional University Cooperation (IUC) Programmes with Universidad Central “Marta Abreu” de las Villas (UCLV) and Universidad de Oriente (UO), and an ICT Network programme led by UCLV. Overall 95 projects were executed between 2003 and 2023.



Towards the East (Picture: Peter De Lannoy)

## Higher education as a driving force for sustainable development

With 25 years of successful cooperation, Cuba assured itself a special place in the VLIR-UOS portfolio as **one of the top countries**.

VLIR-UOS revised its country approach towards an ‘Agenda 2030 on Sustainable Development’ centered approach, where country reference frameworks (CRF) are worked out. The CRF document supports teams of academics when identifying and formulating project proposals, by providing a context analysis focused on Agenda 2030 on Sustainable Development and the higher education sector in a given country, and by providing an overview of Belgian development actors, their ongoing projects and partners in that country in view of exploration of opportunities for synergy and complementarity. On the other hand Belgian HE and Science actors joined in a thematic Joint Strategic Framework (JSF) on HES4SD, all strongly represented in Cuba. VLIR-UOS cooperation in Cuba has always been strongly aligned with the Cuban national priorities such as in the past increased attention to the development of Eastern (‘Oriente’) Cuba, ICT for development, food security, environmental sustainability and quality of life (public and preventive **health**). In the context of international cooperation, Cuban higher education also prioritises strengthening of processes of internationalisation, institutional and human capacity building, doctoral programmes and research and innovation.

## HEIs as driver of change

### University network on ICT for development

The goal of the **Network University Cooperation** on **ICT** for development is to bring together expertise about ICT for **education** (including tools for English learning), ICT for **research** (including access to information, statistics, bioinformatics), ICT **infrastructure** and **computer sciences**. The cooperation network is an academic programme that emphasizes human capacity building through high-impact research pertinent to economic and social priorities of the country, all related to ICT. The Network is finalising in August 2024 after a very positive external final evaluation.

## Institutional partnerships

### Results of long-term cooperation with Universidad Central “Marta Abreu” de las Villas (UCLV)

Between 2003 and 2013 UCLV was the main partner university in Cuba through an Institutional University Cooperation (IUC). UCLV was established in 1948 and is located in central Cuba. Initially offering Agricultural Sciences only, it nowadays **offers a full range of academic programmes**. As stated by the final evaluation, “the IUC overall had a **very significant and unprecedented impact on the whole of UCLV**. It has changed the working culture in several key faculties and departments”. UCLV was able to strengthen its position as a **top university** in the Cuban higher education system and affirm amongst other its lead role in **agriculture/biotechnology** and **computer sciences**.

### IUC with Universidad de Oriente (UO)

The IUC with Universidad de Oriente of Santiago de Cuba, started in 2013, is in line with the priority to focus on **strengthening the development in Eastern Cuba**. After an overall positive final evaluation, the project is now out-phasing until the end of August 2025. The IUC aimed **at improving the university performance** on **research, innovation** and **teaching** (in the fields of food security, environment and climate change, health and education support, energy and fuels, science and technology improvement), its overall **institutional support structures** (e.g. ICT and infrastructure, academic English...) and the **cooperation** with eastern Cuban universities. **Extension of the cooperation results** from the university to all the eastern of Cuba is put forward.

## VLIR-UOS partnerships

The Network University Cooperation is based on a **partnership** between 6 Cuban universities, the Cuban Ministry of Higher Education and 3 Flemish universities. The goal of these partnerships is **capacity building** based on long term investments in human capital and building up **networks**. The knowledge and knowhow of **6 Cuban universities** (UCLV, Universidad de Pinar del Río, Universidad de las Ciencias Informáticas, Universidad "Oscar Lucero Moya" de Holguín, Universidad de Camagüey and UO) are brought together and represents higher education in all regions of the country.



## ICT as a transversal theme

ICT has always had a special place in VLIR-UOS cooperation with Cuba. Since many years Cuban universities had to cope with **extremely limited bandwidth** and only through high creativity and dedication it was possible to run the ICT environments at Cuban universities. **Flemish open source software** (ABCD) also found its way to libraries and museums in Cuba, with the support of a VLIR-UOS library expert group. After the pilot in Cuba, the library computerisation system was implemented in various other VLIR-UOS partner countries.



## Focus on sustainable development priorities

TEAM projects and Short Initiatives (SI) aim to strengthen the research and education capacity, exploring and building capacity in view of creating sustainable solutions to local and global development challenges.

### Food security

Eastern Cuba is a crucial region for assuring food security in relation to environment, a priority theme for the Cuban state. Several VLIR-UOS projects from the past already focused on issues related to food security (soil systems, dairy production, livestock production, food and plant biotechnology) and environmental friendly technologies for production. A project with Universidad de Camaguey focuses on developing **eco-friendly strategies** to control invasion of land by invasive woody plants ('marabú') as to increase food production. Another project develops research and training of human resources in **plant biotechnology** in order to develop clean and elite plantlets and seeds for agriculture.

### Health

Public health is important in Cuba and research in this domain continues of national priority. A project with the Instituto Superior Politécnico works on **rehabilitation of children** with cerebral palsy. The project with the Centro de Neurociencias de Cuba develops tools and practical guidelines for the prevention and early diagnosis of **dementia**. A short term project with Universidad de Havana strengthened co-responsible **elderly care**.

### Environment

A finalised TEAM project with the Universidad de Cienfuegos focused on **clean production and technologies for industry**. This project was particularly relevant in a context of high energy shortage and old industries, where modernization of industries in a **sustainable, environment-friendly** manner is crucial. This new knowledge was transferred to a number of the old industries in the Cienfuegos Bay Area (oil refinery company, cement factory) amongst other to assist relevant stakeholders in complying with heavy metal emission standards.

## Scholarships

Scholarships are powerful tools. Most scholarships are awarded within Cuba projects and support the processes of change at the level of a department or institution. Scholars are also triggered to broaden their horizon, learn to look at problems from a multidisciplinary perspective and grow into a skilful researcher.

## About the Country Reference Frameworks

VLIR-UOS **Country Reference Frameworks** (CRF) support teams of academics when identifying and formulating project proposals, by providing a context analysis focused on Agenda 2030 on Sustainable Development and the higher education sector in a given country, and by providing an overview of Belgian development actors, their ongoing projects and partners in that country in view of exploration of opportunities for synergy and complementarity within the Joint Strategic Framework of Belgian Non-Governmental Actors active in Ecuador. On the other hand Belgian HE and Science actors joined in a thematic Joint Strategic Framework (JSF) on HES4SD.

The country reference frameworks consist of three components: (i) overview of VLIR-UOS projects in the country; (ii) context analysis focused on the Agenda 2030 framework and the higher education sector; (iii) overview of Belgian development actors (ANGCs involved in thematic or geographic JSFs & Enabel), their local partners and their regional/thematic focus

More information:

[vliruos.be/cuba](http://vliruos.be/cuba)

Total budget Cuba 2003-2023 (in €)	
Projects	€ 27,359,194
Individual scholars	€ 569,573
<b>Total</b>	<b>€ 27,928,767</b>

Scholars from Cuba in the context of VLIR-UOS cooperation (2003-2023)	
PhD* (finalised)	160
Short Term*	371
Study/Master	7
<b>Total</b>	<b>538</b>



\* The numbers are a minimal estimation as a number of local (short term and PHD) scholarships within projects and programmes are not calculated.

In addition to Cuban scholars coming to Belgium, 86 Belgian scholars were granted a travel grant (short term) to Cuba. More information on the scholarships of VLIR-UOS: [www.vliruos.be/scholarships](http://www.vliruos.be/scholarships).

## About VLIR-UOS

VLIR-UOS supports partnerships between universities and university colleges in Flanders (Belgium) and partner countries looking for innovative responses to global and local sustainable development challenges.

VLIR-UOS is part of the Flemish Interuniversity Council and receives funding from the Belgian Development Cooperation. [www.vliruos.be](http://www.vliruos.be)

**Contact:** Peter De Lannoy,  + 32 2 550 19 64,  [peter.delannoy@vliruos.be](mailto:peter.delannoy@vliruos.be)