

# US fuel blockade 'brutal' for Cuba's universities, minister says

Constant power outages and lack of fuel risks causing lasting damage to island's higher education sector, warns Reynaldo Velázquez Zaldívar

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The US fuel blockade on Cuba has been "brutal" for its universities, the deputy minister for higher education has said, with operations heavily disrupted because of a lack of power.

Fuel imports have been prevented from reaching the Caribbean nation for the past four months as the Trump administration pushes for regime change in the country.

Cuba has now completely run out of diesel and fuel oil, with people left without energy for up to 20 hours a day. Protests have been held across the country in recent days.

Tensions with the US have increased after the former leader Raúl Castro was accused of murder over the downing of two US planes 30 years ago. Donald Trump has threatened to take military action, warning the country is a "national security threat".

Minister Reynaldo Velázquez Zaldívar told *Times Higher Education* that the blockages have crippled the sector, with the government moving university classes online in February as part of efforts to conserve electricity.

Teaching has been suspended in some cases, and study abroad exchanges have been cancelled (<https://www.thedartmouth.com/article/2026/04/arce-gandhi-cuba-study-abroad-cancelled-this-fall->o-u-s-oil-blockade) because of the energy crisis. On 20 May the government announced



Source: iStock/WoodysPhotos

that university entrance exams would be cancelled (<https://t.me/mesaredondaoficial/6683>), and students' admissions would instead be based on an average of their previous marks.

Zaldívar described the situation as “brutal” and warned that it could have a “big impact” on the country's education sector going forward, with teaching heavily disrupted by the lack of power.

“Our main objective right now is to keep our educational system going. We cannot stop education,” Zaldívar said, speaking through a translator at the Education World Forum.

Despite moving studies online, challenges have persisted. Students' ability to access online resources is restricted by the power outages, and Cuba's universities have had to resort to “traditional” teaching methods, including providing students with printed resources.

US export controls mean that technology made with 10 per cent or more US components cannot be sold to Cuba, which means it is “very difficult for us to modernise our labs”, Zaldívar said.

Cuba is also barred from using US telecoms services. Academics are therefore unable, Zaldívar explained, to access popular communication tools such as Zoom, impacting their ability to participate in conferences on the platform.

This has forced the country to seek other communication tools and develop international partnerships to ease the impact of US sanctions. “It's difficult. But it's not impossible,” he said.

Although Cuban universities have strong international links, including partnerships with UCL (<https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/americas-blog/2026/04/13/universities-driving-community-change-in-cuba-the-uk-and-beyond/>), efforts to boost internationalisation have been stifled by global economic circumstances.

“With the economic crisis across the world, the funding for collaboration has decreased. But any time there is an opportunity and Cuba has the opportunity of participation, we will be there,” Zaldívar said.

The government is looking to align its higher education sector more closely to its national and economic priorities, including boosting research on energy and food security, which is also a major concern for the country amid increased adverse weather events caused by climate change.

Aligning the higher education sector with wider national priorities would have further benefits, Zaldívar outlined. The country suffers brain drain among its youth population and both the economy and the university sector would benefit if the government sought to make Cuba a “more attractive” country for its young people.

Despite its challenges, Zaldívar, who worked in the university sector for more than 25 years before becoming minister, remained committed to “not only keeping our educational system going, but also to continue developing our educational system to reach the quality it deserves”.

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