



## Key foundations of the professionalization process among university students

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**Received:** January 31, 2025

**Accepted:** October 1, 2025

**Published:** December 14, 2025

**Citar como:** Rodríguez-Fuentes S, Breijo-Worosz T, Arencibia-Castro M, Suárez Rodríguez AT, Rodríguez-Valdés L. Fundamentos principales del proceso de profesionalización en los estudiantes universitarios. Rev Ciencias Médicas [Internet]. 2025 [citado: fecha de acceso]; 29(2025): e6661. Disponible en: <http://revcmpinar.sld.cu/index.php/publicaciones/article/view/6661>

### ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** professionalization is a driver of progress, enabling individuals and society to reach their full potential.

**Objective:** to establish the theoretical and methodological foundations underlying the professionalization process, in support of professional modes of action among university students.

**Methods:** the research was based on a critical-valuative analysis with a qualitative approach, integrating theoretical and empirical methods under the materialist dialectical method. Historical-logical analysis, documentary and bibliographic review, interviews, and surveys were applied. Triangulation of results enabled the understanding of trends, needs, and modes of action in university professionalization.

**Results:** the international analysis of the professionalization process reveals diverse approaches, including promoting dual education as a means of integrating theory and practice, implementing workplace internships to strengthen teacher preparation, and advancing university autonomy to develop unique models and innovative pedagogical alternatives. In Cuba, the process is distinguished by state policies that orient training toward professional refinement, responding to 21st-century social and cultural demands. There is a confirmed need to consolidate systemic, inclusive, and contextualized principles that integrate knowledge, skills, and values for competent professional performance.

**Conclusions:** the professionalization process must foster in university students modes of action and ways of proceeding that promote competent professional performance, enabling them to align with the demands of education and society at large.

**Keywords:** Professional Competence; Staff Development; Education, Professional; Students.

## INTRODUCTION

Quality education for university students is a priority established by the Cuban state for higher education. This position is reaffirmed by the Ministry of Higher Education (MES), whose main challenge is the formation of well-rounded, competent professionals committed to the Revolution. In this regard, the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Cuba (PCC), Miguel Díaz-Canel Bermúdez, has emphasized the moral and ideological competencies that should characterize today's Cuban graduate—competencies that contribute to national development and enable them to address pedagogical processes while demonstrating innovation and creativity in their professional environment.<sup>(1)</sup>

Accordingly, universities have enhanced their flexibility to ensure graduates possess the preparation needed to perform successfully in their professions across diverse institutions, based on the quality and effectiveness of their core academic processes. Thus, the focus guiding curricula and academic programs is not the ministry or the university itself, but society.<sup>(2)</sup>

The Cuban university, as a social institution, is committed to maintaining a modern, humanistic, universalized, scientific, technological, innovative, and socially integrated model, deeply engaged in building a prosperous and sustainable socialism. Therefore, professional training is a primary concern for universities and socializing agencies, with quality and relevance serving as essential pillars of this social institution.

Professional training is an intrinsically linked and dialectical professionalization process, wherein graduates' practical experiences contribute to their initial professional formation.<sup>(3)</sup> Contemporary literature conceptualizes professionalization as a continuous process that qualifies individuals for professional practice, with professionalism as its ultimate outcome.

The authors adopt the view that professionalization is a necessary process for the ongoing transformation of professionals, contributing to the improvement of universities' core processes.<sup>(4)</sup> Consequently, graduates from Cuban universities require more comprehensive preparation to address diversity through a pedagogical stance that integrates gender, cultural differences, and the developmental and learning characteristics of adolescents and youth—foundational elements for increasingly inclusive practices.

In this context, it is a social priority to contribute to the holistic formation of new generations by fostering competent professional modes of action among training educators. These professional modes of action must be oriented toward continuous improvement, adaptation to specific needs and contexts, and the promotion of inclusive and equitable education.<sup>(5)</sup>

Numerous researchers have sought to define professional modes of action as the organizing and developmental core of university students' professional training. In this sense, when students fully master both the logic of their discipline and the logic of the professional contexts in which they will operate, they demonstrate professional modes of action.<sup>(6)</sup>

Given this, for university students to develop these modes of action through professionalization, they must be motivated to integrate new knowledge into their practice, fully and consciously address professional problems through sequenced actions and operations that dynamically integrate disciplinary content, interact effectively with professional objects, and express satisfaction in their work. In summary, the professionalization process must cultivate in university students modes of action and ways of proceeding that enable competent professional performance aligned with the demands of contemporary Cuban society.

This research identified the following social problem: insufficient development of professional modes of action among university students, hindering their performance during professional practice. In this regard, the following external manifestations of the professionalization process's shortcomings were recognized, evidencing a social problem:

- Theoretical and methodological gaps in the content provided during workplace internships at various employing agencies.
- Insufficient professional skills that impede the development of action modes conducive to creative and innovative solutions to professional challenges.

Accordingly, this study aimed to establish the theoretical and methodological foundations underpinning the professionalization process in support of professional modes of action among university students.

## METHODS

A critical-valuative analysis was conducted with a qualitative approach to the professionalization process from theoretical, conceptual, historical, and trend-based perspectives. The systemic combination of theoretical and empirical methods enabled the research design, planning, execution, and presentation of results.

The study was guided by the following methods, with the materialist dialectical method serving as the general method—allowing the object of study to be examined as a process, identifying its components, contradictions, and providing the foundation for other applied methods.

Theoretical methods included historical-logical analysis to interpret, from a materialist dialectical perspective, the historical evolution of the professionalization process and its contextualization among university students.

Analysis and synthesis were employed to select content through a bibliographic review of articles published over the past five years, as well as key institutional documents such as the Professional Profile Model and curricula, to understand the system of knowledge, skills, and values students must develop during their training under the guidance of their educators.

Documentary analysis enabled the identification of needs related to the professionalization process and clarified current trends in higher education.

Essential empirical methods included interviews with administrators and faculty, as well as surveys of program instructors, to obtain reliable information regarding the professionalization process and to understand their perceptions of how it manifests in students' modes of action.

Triangulation was carried out by integrating and cross-validating the results obtained through the applied methods.

## RESULTS

### Characteristics of the professionalization process in the international context

Based on the methods and instruments applied to verify the problem, the following results were obtained:

- In Europe, dual or alternating training is promoted as a pathway for professionalization.
- In North America, workplace internships during initial training are emphasized to support teacher professionalization.
- Latin America presents a diverse and enriching landscape, advocating for institutional autonomy so that each university can develop its own Teacher Training Model.
- Additionally, new professionalization pathways for teaching are encouraged, employing alternative and innovative pedagogical approaches driven by voices from Latin American universities.

The approach to the professionalization process in the Cuban context differs, as it is guided by state-level policies that direct this process toward the continuous improvement of the diverse professions formed in higher education. It is viewed as a process emerging from the social, economic, and cultural developments of the 21st century, necessitating enhanced professional performance that responds to the current needs and interests of society.

This research adopts the postulates of Breijo,<sup>(7)</sup> who conceptualizes professionalization as a process understood as activity, whose theory is explained through a system of actions, operations, and tasks aimed at achieving an objective, aligned with the needs, motives, and interests of the individuals involved.

### Foundations of the professionalization process, based on the following essential ideas:

1. The professionalization process in university students is guided and regulated by systemic, holistic, and contextualized principles.
2. The professionalization process in university students is grounded in the development of professional modes of action that correspond to more comprehensive training, attention to diversity, and increasingly inclusive practices.
3. The professionalization process in university students is realized through the effective use of the potential embedded in course curricula to foster engagement with professional problems.

Analyzing all these elements, the professionalization process is represented as shown in Figure 1.



**Fig. 1.** Components of the professionalization process in university students.

Therefore, designing the professionalization process from the initial training of these students—gradually acquiring knowledge, skills, values, and methods—will foster professional modes of action that contribute to the creative and innovative resolution of professional problems encountered in diverse settings.<sup>(8)</sup>

In conclusion, the study highlighted the need to strengthen the professionalization process to develop modes of action that enable students to become competent professionals aligned with the demands of contemporary society.

#### **Main limitations of the studied process:**

- Insufficient integration of academic, labor, research, and extension activities in support of the professionalization process.
- Inadequate emphasis on the potential of the professionalization process within student training to achieve the corresponding modes of action outlined for each academic year.
- Lack of integrated knowledge, skills, and values needed to assume professional modes of action commensurate with the demands of present-day Cuban society.

## **DISCUSSION**

Cuban university programs establish a model of professional action that depends on the specific professional object of work. In this regard, a key challenge arises: ensuring the quality of professional action in alignment with the profession's object and the curricular practices implemented, based on the expected profile of the professional formed through the continuous training process—conceived and executed in coordination between workplaces and universities.<sup>(9)</sup>

Points of convergence were identified with other studies addressing this topic. It is acknowledged that student motivation is essential for developing professional modes of action, but not in isolation—rather, in connection with other elements such as professional identity, which students progressively construct throughout their studies.<sup>(10)</sup>

Producing graduates with professional capabilities to respond to the realities of their context, equipped with a scientific and transformative attitude, is crucial for preparing students to meet current labor market challenges and societal demands. Thus, the authors agree with the assertion: "The problems and demands generated by pedagogical professional practice allow for problem identification and resolution, facilitate exchange, foster self-confidence, and enrich individual thinking..."<sup>(11)</sup>

Consequently, Cuban Higher Education is committed to maintaining a model of university that is modern, humanistic, universalized, scientific, technological, innovative, socially integrated, and deeply committed to building a prosperous and sustainable socialism. In this vein, the authors concur with Calvo-Ferrer and Muñoz-Villena,<sup>(12)</sup> who emphasize the necessity for universities to adopt an integrative vision in which academic training and professionalization are seen as complementary—not only for the labor market but also for fostering critical and engaged citizenship.

In this context, it is essential today to implement a formative process that fosters creativity in university students, given its importance for their professional development and for solving professional problems in their practice settings.<sup>(13)</sup> Students must become active agents in their own learning, aware of their role in their professional growth and the need to be creative in seeking innovative solutions within their professional environments.

The authors also agree with Gutiérrez et al.<sup>(14)</sup>, who argue that developing and refining professional modes of action requires individualizing behaviors, becoming conscious of one's actions, recognizing one's usefulness, and acknowledging one's limitations as a professional.

It is valid to reflect that professional modes of action are acquired from initial training through the appropriation of knowledge, skills, and values within the pedagogical activities in which the professional engages, making decisions to transform educational reality and themselves. In this regard, the authors concur with Bermúdez<sup>(10)</sup> and Sánchez,<sup>(15)</sup> who have researched the formation and structuring of professional modes of action—elements that guide and develop the professional training process in alignment with the Cuban educational system.

## CONCLUSIONS

In summary, the professionalization process among university students constitutes a fundamental axis for ensuring their holistic preparation. It is not merely about acquiring technical knowledge, but about fostering modes of action and ways of proceeding that consolidate competent professional performance. This process entails developing skills, values, and attitudes that enable future professionals to respond effectively to the demands of higher education and society at large.

### Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### Author contributions

**SRF:** Conceptualization, drafting of the manuscript, writing

**TBW:** Visualization, drafting of the manuscript, critical review

**MAC:** Drafting of the manuscript, bibliographic reference search

**ATSR, LRV:** Manuscript writing, critical review

## Funding

No funding was received for this study.

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