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# The UNA: Challenges and trends guiding our future

## La UNA: Desafíos y tendencias que orientan nuestro futuro



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## Abstract

"The UNA: Challenges and trends shaping our future" is a reflective analysis on the present and future of higher education, with a specific focus on the National Open University (UNA). It examines the adoption of hybrid pedagogies, which play a substantial role in the educational debate. The essay discusses the role of universities in being a key player in society and advocates for a strong commitment to creativity and improvement. The future of the UNA is promising; it can be achieved through careful planning and visionary leadership, in order to overcome challenges and establish itself as a leading institution in the training of professionals committed to the future. Overall, this study provides a comprehensive and structured overview of university challenges and trends, emphasizing the need for adaptation and continuous improvement in the field of education.

**Keywords:** Higher Education, National Open University (UNA), hybrid pedagogies, educational challenges.

## Resumen

"La UNA: Desafíos y tendencias que orientan nuestro futuro" es un análisis reflexivo sobre el presente y futuro de la educación superior, con enfoque específico en la Universidad Nacional Abierta (UNA). Se examina la adopción de pedagogías híbridas, las cuales ocupan una parte sustantiva del debate educativo. En el artículo se razona sobre el papel de las universidades a la hora de ser el todo en la sociedad y a la defensa vehemente por una dedicación persistente a la creatividad y la mejora. El mañana de la UNA es promisorio; se puede llevar a cabo con una planificación cuidadosa y un liderazgo visionario, para superar los desafíos y afirmarse como una institución líder en la formación de profesionales comprometidos con el porvenir. En conjunto, este estudio proporciona una visión integral y estructurada de los desafíos y tendencias universitarias, subrayando la necesidad de adaptación y mejora continua en el ámbito educativo.

**Palabras clave:** Educación superior, Universidad Nacional Abierta (UNA), pedagogías híbridas, desafíos educativos.

## Introduction

Organizations in the 21st century have been in constant flux, aiming to adapt to the country's realities and the new paradigms on which society has been centered. Political and economic pressures have driven social and cultural changes that characterize Venezuelan society and, consequently, impact both the internal and external contexts of organizations.

In this continuous state of institutional change, such transformations appear to be fixed and not accidental; they are evident across various social domains, including the nature of social relations, work, and particularly the development and rise of new information and communi-



cation technologies. Additionally, the demands of economic globalization, such as quality, timeliness, competitiveness, and increased access, along with the intensification of educational globalization, call for internationalization as an active response to the globalization of knowledge.

In light of this reality, especially within the university context, a new vision is required. Venezuelan universities, therefore, represent an expression of social democratization and have become a project of interest for the Venezuelan State, especially today when society is experiencing a period of uncertainties and ambiguities. These institutions are called upon to provide social leadership and address the demands of the nation's integral development, taking on the responsibility of participating in the construction of a new country.

Regarding these issues, dilemmas and discussions about the university's role in acting within a society aspiring to be participatory and self-managed are prevalent within these institutions. Thus, public and private universities are in debate, facing ruptures, challenges, readjustments, and emerging proposals aimed at addressing the crisis, the transition, and the conceptions of authority, knowledge, and especially the social function of these institutions. This essay analyzes these trends and how institutions can adjust and thrive in an ever-evolving environment, requiring well-planned strategies of coordination, partnerships, and proposals.

### **Traits and trends in the current context**

The topic of globalization is widely discussed today. It is recognized as a modern social phenomenon, driven primarily by scientific and technological advances, especially in communication and electronics, along with the aspirations of multinational corporations. Globalization is defined and explained in various ways; Reyes (2008) provides some ideas that, in a way, constitute a simplified synthesis of the meaning and scope of globalization: Globalization is a set of theoretical proposals that highlight two major trends: (a) global communication systems, and (b) economic conditions, particularly those related to the mobility of financial and commercial resources.

However, Brünner offers an interpretation of globalization as the manifestation of four phenomena closely linked to one another: (a) the universalization of markets and the advancement of post-industrial capitalism, (b) the diffusion of the democratic model as the ideal form of political organization for States, (c) the telecommunications revolution, leading to the so-called "information society," and (d) the generalization of a cultural "climate" of the era, known as postmodernity.

Moreover, the so-called knowledge, information, and learning society in the digital age, as a paradigm for reorganizing the forms of production, organization, management, and communication in all areas of human activity, is inaugurating new fields that have fostered the development of a new civilization (cultural revolution), which has been accelerated by the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic.



In addition to the economic, productive, organizational, digital, informational, and commercial spectrum, this phenomenon presents significant challenges in the realm of state responsibilities in countries like Venezuela. The country has entered a new stage, and therefore, all its systems and subsystems have as well. In recent years, Venezuela did not align its expectations with the growing process of globalization, nor did it attempt to align national development with it.

This phenomenon, which had been taking shape for several years, produced structural effects on the economy, society, and politics, exacerbating changes in the economic model. This scenario brought severe consequences for the structure of the State, with deregulating reforms and intervention in social policy, generating sharp increases in poverty, informality, migration, job insecurity, exclusion, and the deterioration of living conditions for the population.

Thus, one of the fundamental challenges facing higher education is to overcome these obstacles in order to help build structural changes in the country while addressing social and environmental needs. This requires appropriate curricula, content, and educational models, as well as the adaptation of teaching qualifications to stay at the forefront of these transformations in a dynamic way.

### Liquid society, technology, and digitalization

This new 21st-century society is rapidly being built with information and communication technologies. Its foundations support daily activities across the spheres of the economy, health, housing, food, transportation, and, of course, education. Institutions dedicated to the transmission of knowledge are compelled to incorporate these tools for both general and specialized education; however, their integration into the educational process also presents challenges.

We are witnessing the dissolution of the human sense of social belonging, giving way to a more defined individuality. The human being experiences independence, and society is no longer a mere sum of individualities but the collective of those individualities. According to [Bauman \(2003\)](#), we are in the context of liquid modernity, where the challenge lies in building a future and finding solutions to contemporary difficulties, as well as understanding the new ways of relating to knowledge that emerge in today's dynamics.

[Bauman \(2003\)](#) explores the attributes of capitalist society that have endured over time and argues that everything changes from one moment to the next; we are consistent with these changes and think that nothing is permanent. We live in a present where everything is consumable and elastic, including human beings. The values and dogmas of previous generations were solid, but today, nothing is unbreakable or fixed. This leads to significant variations across all social, economic, political, cultural, and educational spaces.

It is therefore necessary to establish new methods and adopt tools and concepts that allow us to engage with the emerging scenarios for knowledge and interaction between individuals. Li-



liquid learning (Bauman, 2008) is "a type of education that adapts to change," offering a wealth of possibilities in a globalized world. It is a form of education that breaks with established solidity and prepares individuals to live in a changing world filled with information, networked behavior, connectivity, and engagement in communities of practice.

The adaptation of the UNA to these changes is framed within the context of the digital, knowledge, and information society, or learning society, embodying the voice of this liquid volatility. This adaptation involves not only convergent and divergent dynamics but also the inclusion of technology in academic spaces, resulting in changes in the management and production of knowledge.

### Hybrid pedagogies

In the academic realm, the experiences and lessons imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic have led to the projection of a hybrid model in the teaching-learning process, adapted to new technologies. The teaching model at the UNA must adapt to this technology, as it allows for synchronous and asynchronous communication across distant locations.

Thus, the hybrid concept offers an opportunity for coherence in teaching and learning, as it implies growth and spatial-temporal stability (synchronous and asynchronous) within the educational environment. According to Duarte *et al.* (2008, p. 76), "this training modality is defined by the intertwined use of presence and non-presence in the classroom. This can only be achieved by modifying the design and teaching planning of courses and subjects."

In this context, face-to-face interactions are integrated with the opportunities offered by digital technology. This communicative association opens up a new didactic space, where both teachers and students use physical and intangible tools to model meaningful learning. Hybrid pedagogy requires a flexible curriculum that integrates in-person and virtual activities in a coherent manner.

On the other hand, Graham (2006) emphasizes that hybrid learning is the fusion of two archetypal learning environments, where traditional face-to-face learning has existed for centuries. However, the exponential growth and expansion of distributed learning environments align with the increasing technological possibilities for distributed communication and interaction. Graham argues that, in the past, there has been a significant contrast between these two learning environments, using different combinations of media and methods, and targeting different audiences.

The main challenge in designing and developing hybrid environments lies in understanding that this is a new educational modality with particular characteristics. When well understood, it can lead to the best use of both in-person and virtual possibilities. Viewing hybrid environments as either in-person environments with virtual support elements or virtual environments with some in-person encounters reduces the full potential of this modality.



## National university scenario

In the Venezuelan case, universities today find themselves in an increasingly complex and dynamic environment, facing the challenge of changing and innovating an educational method that presents conservationist and traditionalist characteristics at all levels and modalities of education. In this scenario, the university organization is presented with numerous challenges, to which it must respond both within the system itself and from the institutional position of each university. A process of university transformation is necessary, with policies, programs, and management styles that allow for revitalization.

Today, the higher education system has led to universities that, with few exceptions, do not meet minimum quality standards in university functions such as undergraduate and postgraduate teaching, research and innovation, humanities development, artistic creation and production, extension, and communication. This has caused distortions in the functioning of universities, low student enrollment, insufficient funding, and a considerable loss of academic human capital.

Venezuelan universities resist; their staff suffers from deep demotivation, induced by an administration that imposes its manifest incapacity. Institutions lack the authority to respond to their staff, who endure low wages that restrict their ability to face the harsh economic and social realities. Students, maintaining low enrollment, struggle to participate in virtual spaces applied in this new reality, many of them without the resources or basic services (computers, smartphones, and connectivity) necessary for online learning. At the same time, university authorities bear the weight of managing institutions with insufficient financial resources to maintain large infrastructures and obsolete technological resources.

Education from home is promoted, assuming that everyone has computers, smartphones, and internet access, along with electricity. However, the virtualization of education faces significant challenges, given the lack of equipment, connectivity, and economic resources, as well as limited opportunities for technological updates. In this context, universities suffer from neglect, relying on the goodwill of their staff to continue functioning, having been left to their fate in terms of funding and without a national development strategy, which should be the foundation of the role of state universities worldwide.

In this context of demands, the Venezuelan university system is called to reimagine itself with new formats that keep it current, fulfilling its social and scientific relevance and transcending existing boundaries. The trend is to project higher education into a “new stage, not from the limits of existing transformation, but from the rupture brought by a new paradigm of lifelong learning and knowledge management, with social responsibility” (Aponte, 2008, p. 147).

Beyond some advances and the current uncertainties, state funding for universities continues to maintain an extremely complex environment for institutional management, forcing them to adapt to the logic of the market and business, which undermines their educational and public



mission. Despite this adverse framework, UNA has managed to maintain its standing, as evidenced by the preference of students to pursue undergraduate and postgraduate degrees.

### **The National Open University**

The creation and launch of the UNA on September 27, 1977, did not simply represent adding another university to the existing ones at the time. The formation of UNA embodied a bold effort at innovation, moving from the design phase to full and regular operation through a large-scale model that had no prior opportunity to be tested.

The proposal to establish a large distance-learning university—UNA—was initially well-received politically. UNA emerged as an alternative for training qualified and entrepreneurial professionals in areas crucial to social development, ensuring their integration into both national and international labor markets.

Additionally, the University has gone through various stages in its academic history. Gradually, it has evolved, responding to the changes that have taken place in the social, political, and economic contexts, even as it has consistently upheld the fundamental principles that form its core pillars, allowing it to endure over time.

University innovation is therefore a necessity in today's world. Given the new realities of globalization, the creation of larger economic zones, the acceleration of communications, competitiveness, and the emergence of new knowledge, higher education faces significant challenges. These can only be addressed through profound and systematic processes of change.

### **Context UNA**

Universities have been assigned various functions that, while historically they have taken on different forms, have nonetheless maintained a certain continuity. In recent years, the role of promoting the social, cultural, and economic development of the surrounding society has been increasingly emphasized. The current outlook forces us to view higher education through a variety of contexts influenced by political variables. One such scenario includes ongoing economic decline, reduced private-sector employment, public-sector job restrictions, and insecurity. All these factors point to the continuation and worsening of the university crisis, compounded by ongoing migration.

The economic crisis and its mismanagement have undoubtedly affected budgetary resources and led to a decline in both faculty and student numbers. Additionally, it has impacted the security of university buildings, which have become targets for theft and vandalism, resulting in the loss of technical equipment and much of the electrical, sanitary, and management infrastructure.

The University must develop strategies based on its distinctive capabilities, while also considering





the social, economic, and regulatory contexts. In the proposal process, several problems affecting the university were identified and grouped according to their process and substantive function. Below, the problems are outlined, followed by proposals on how these challenges can be viewed as opportunities for UNA.

### **Current situation of campuses, staff, technology, and advisors/counselors**

- Local Centers and Support Units with damaged infrastructure and no students.
- Facilities in use and disuse.
- Need for teaching, administrative, and labor staff.
- Current need for technological infrastructure at UNA.
- Lack of connectivity.
- Obsolescence and deterioration of equipment.

The Local Centers, which serve as the university's representation points in various states, face similar problems across the country. These include the deterioration of physical infrastructure, the lack of basic services like potable water and electricity, the absence of air conditioning, and the lack of internet connectivity. Furthermore, the institution has been the victim of theft and vandalism, with most incidents remaining unresolved. These criminal acts have led to the loss of essential equipment and materials for university teaching, which cannot be replaced due to budget constraints.

To describe the current conditions at UNA, one could visit any of its campuses, observe what is seen, and fill in the name of any city. UNA shares a mirrored reality with its sister institutions. This refers to its universe: infrastructure, teaching, labor, and administrative staff, and students.

Although some of its buildings have been empty or nearly empty in recent years, it is the human capital that has kept the university alive. UNA should be capable of managing not only a vast infrastructure but everything that comes with it, as it once did. However, the university has failed to meet its obligations to provide the necessary resources, leading to the abandonment of its facilities.

Another issue is the academic offerings, which are weak, along with the absence of students and the lack of academic staff in several areas. This creates disorganization between administrative and academic processes and resources, leading to problems in coordinating methods and a lack of investment in physical, technological, and human resources.

Administrative processes, such as purchasing materials, are slow, delaying the execution of tasks and ignoring established schedules. Delays in the approval of human resource contracts and financial allocations reduce the visibility and competitiveness of the university. Administrative processes support core functions, but the management of these processes faces common problems, affecting multiple actors. These issues are mainly evident in the lack of administrative staff and financial resources.



Another key challenge is the obsolescence of technological infrastructure and the lack of connectivity, which does not adequately support academic processes, leading to delays. There is a lack of development guidelines for a virtual wellness program that would impact administrative processes. The infrastructure is not suitable for such processes, resulting in low participation and integration due to the absence of appropriate, well-equipped spaces where users can access information.

Overall, there is a deficiency and insufficiency in the physical infrastructure, equipment, and connectivity, which prevent UNA from maintaining the level of visibility and image positioning necessary to ensure the successful execution of its core functions. This deficiency also limits the ability to carry out various university activities freely.

### **Enrollment, advising/counseling, instructional material development, and evaluation**

- Low undergraduate enrollment.
- Degree programs with few students.
- Failures in processes.
- Development of teaching resources.
- Evaluation strategies.

The main issues affecting student enrollment at UNA are largely a result of the economic crisis and emigration, leading to a decrease in the number of new students. Another factor impacting students is the lack of effective communication channels with advisors, either due to a shortage of advisors or the lack of connectivity and equipment. In addition, the absence of adequate follow-up and evaluation strategies often renders them ineffective. Students also miss opportunities to participate in wellness programs, sometimes due to a lack of awareness, as they often do not receive timely information, which leads to dissatisfaction.

UNA's current Integrated Information System has notable weaknesses. Although the system met user demands in the recent past, the technology it relies on has become obsolete. A comprehensive diagnosis is needed to identify areas for improvement, which would allow for more efficient management. Moreover, new teaching and learning guidelines must be established to help students acquire knowledge, skills, and competencies. It is essential to move beyond the mechanical repetition of information, which is now easily and quickly accessible.

In this context, university performance evaluations are often seen as a way to assess the knowledge, skills, and competencies required in future professional life, which are reflected in grades. Currently, there is no commonly accepted model that serves as a reference for how to optimally assess learning that takes place remotely.

Furthermore, the availability of written and digital bibliographic resources is limited. Unlike printed books, which involve significant costs for paper, ink, and printing, digital files can be copied



thousands of times without additional expenses. However, creating, distributing, and updating digital materials is not necessarily cheaper. The ongoing crisis has slowly integrated e-books into university libraries, aligning with the current learning contexts where online resources are becoming increasingly vital.

Digital technologies offer immense opportunities in terms of access, storage, and information transmission. Digital reading environments also offer ways of presenting information that are difficult or impossible to replicate in print, significantly altering how we read. Digital materials can be adapted to the competency levels of individual readers, facilitating flexible learning processes tailored to each learner's needs and development. However, empirical research indicates that the characteristics of digital screens may also encourage less favorable reading habits and thinking patterns.

UNA could capitalize on the benefits of modern educational technology by enhancing the development of digital audiovisual content and adapting evaluation strategies to the nature and characteristics of technology-mediated education.

According to an analysis of the most relevant problems in the institution's core and supporting functions, the most recurring issues include the lack of coordination in core teaching functions, the absence of strategies and policies in various processes, communication and information failures, poor management, little to no allocation of resources for Local Centers, insufficient technological resources and tools, and delays in processes that integrate academics and administration, which result in fundamental issues.

### **Challenges, trends, and opportunities shaping our future**

The university must develop its strategies based on its distinctive strengths while also considering the social, economic, and regulatory context. Incorporating a culture of continuous information gathering—both internal and contextual—is essential. This information, when viewed holistically and from a competitive perspective, allows for a strategic analysis that helps define where we want to be in the coming years. Below, we outline the challenges and trends, and how they present opportunities for UNA.

### **Current situation of facilities, personnel, technology, and advisors/counselors**

- Facilities in use and disuse, with deteriorated equipment, furniture, and green spaces.
- Local Centers and Support Units without students.
- Shortage of administrative and labor staff.
- Urgent need for technological infrastructure at UNA.
- Lack of connectivity.
- Obsolescence and deterioration of equipment.
- Insufficient academic staff.
- Lack of motivation.



## Enrollment, advising/counseling, instructional material development, and evaluation

- Low undergraduate enrollment.
- Programs with few students.
- Process failures.
- Increase in postgraduate enrollment.
- Mixed educational system.
- Development of teaching resources.
- Evaluation strategies.

UNA has an opportunity to align itself as an agile organization in a constant state of change to meet its objectives in a rapidly shifting environment. This requires a high capacity for anticipation and a decisive action-oriented mindset. The university must continuously adapt to new societal needs and requirements, redesigning strategies for advising, supporting, and tracking students' trajectories. Early interventions in cases of academic lag or potential dropout are essential, as is strengthening the teaching and learning processes through didactic-pedagogical strategies focused on meaningful learning, integrated into the curriculum.

UNA should become a university that fully leverages current educational technology, promotes the development of digital audiovisual content, and adapts its evaluation strategies to the nature and characteristics of technology-mediated education. Additionally, the institution must remain competitive in teaching, research, outreach, engagement, and services.

The most complex challenge to date is to conceive and promote a new way of approaching the university's system, with a central focus on developing human, technical, and institutional capacities. These are essential to fulfilling new missions in an uncertain and rapidly changing social context marked by increasing inequality. Neither an adjustment nor a reorganization of the existing system will suffice for the current situation; the necessary change demands potent strategies that reorganize and restructure the entire model. This change must also shift the prevailing perceptions and beliefs regarding how to manage processes and with whom.

It is important to remember that organizations are led by people, and their actions depend on their mindset. For a traditional university, it is often difficult to adapt to the accelerated changes required by current trends and mega-trends, as these often contain contradictory and even antagonistic elements. Reforms cannot simply be decreed; they must evolve through a process in which multi- and transdisciplinary teams, with boldness, creativity, and cutting-edge knowledge, chart a path toward a future of proactive action.

Today, UNA is tasked with breaking away from entrenched paradigms and rethinking itself as an institution essential to addressing the significant challenges of the contemporary world. UNA should focus on training citizens capable of building a more open, fair society based on solidarity and respect for human rights. Above all, it must become a university committed to improving



the quality of life for the population. UNA needs to transform itself into a new, renewed, and creative institution, willing to accept and embrace the challenge of self-transformation—a challenge that must be led both internally and externally, as the country demands it, and so does our era.

### **The university we want**

It is possible that, without the pandemic, the changes in administrative and teaching methods would have been slower. It is also true that universities entered this new world without adequate preparation. However, it remains valid that institutions reinvented themselves to continue their teaching and learning processes to the best of their ability. Faculty members used every available tool to continue teaching their respective disciplines, demonstrating proactivity in overcoming the technological obstacles that arose.

This is a complex reality that the university, in the current context, must face. Addressing it will require well-coordinated and articulated strategies and plans. To move forward, a diagnosis of UNA's current state is necessary to project its functionality.

This diagnosis will allow UNA to improve while adapting to change. It is crucial to project the future by setting institutional, functional, and operational objectives and adjusting the organizational structure to meet the demands of the times. At the same time, it is vital to recover the functions that have been sidelined. All of this must align with current trends, challenges, and developments in education: globalization, international dimension and cooperation, problem-solving, capacity integration, technological change, ICT advancements, knowledge management, and studies.

Significant challenges loom on the horizon. However, the lessons learned offer a glimmer of hope amidst uncertainty. The path forward compels us to envision a renewed Open National University—an institution committed to 21st-century processes that demand the use of virtual mechanisms for the academic functions that define our university. UNA's adaptation will require the reassessment of new competencies in administrative processes, teaching, research, outreach, and service, many of which are already being updated.

UNA was born with a specific mission: to strengthen the higher education system by producing graduates with clear competencies and a strong connection to the social sector. These qualities have enabled graduates to successfully enter the labor market. UNA has fully met this mission and now finds itself at a new stage, one that requires the reorientation of the institution to implement changes and achieve consolidation.

### **Final reflections**

This prolonged crisis presents an opportunity to collectively reflect on the University we want. Therefore, priorities must be defined, actions guided, and efforts coordinated toward a goal that must be both consensual and shared. It is essential, first and foremost, to work from public



policy, as education is a public good, and as such, the State must be the primary guarantor of the right to it. This means that the public administration must ensure the necessary conditions for the educational community to perform its functions under any circumstances and for everyone.

Secondly, collaboration as a strategy. The priority is to build solutions by recognizing the importance of dialogue and shared learning, as well as the joint responsibility among the various actors involved in the educational process. A third point refers to institutional strengthening and capacity development. This involves promoting all actions aimed at having a stronger institution, with greater capacity to respond to the demands of an ever-changing context.

Finally, thinking with a future-oriented mindset. We must be aware of the risks that come with failing to promote strategies that drive the transformation of the University. Viewing adversity as an opportunity for improvement is crucial. We are facing a pivotal moment, a unique opportunity to embark on meaningful change, fostering equity and quality that reaffirms education's ability not only to reform the individual but also as a tool for building a more just society.

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