

Decentralization Process in Distance Learning at the Federal Institute of Espírito Santo - Ifes: challenges and progress

Vitória – ES - 05/2012

Marize Lyra Silva Passos - Instituto Federal do Espírito Santo (Ifes),
marize.passos@ifes.edu.br

Danielli Veiga Carneiro Sondermann - Instituto Federal do Espírito Santo (Ifes),
danielli@ifes.edu.br

José Mário Costa Junior - Instituto Federal do Espírito Santo (Ifes),
jcjunior@ifes.edu.br

Category: Strategies and Policies

Educational Sector: University Education

Classification of the Research Area in EaD

**Macro: EAD Systems and Institutions / Meso: Management and
Organization / Micro: Interaction and Communication in Learning
Communities**

Nature: Planning Models

Class: Innovative Experience

Summary

The objective of this article is to present the history of the management models for Distance Learning (EaD) used by the Federal Institute of Espírito Santo (Ifes). From a small centralized structure, the institution had to use a semi-decentralized management model, in which responsibilities were divided amongst the various campuses across the state of Espírito Santo. In this report on this experience, we mention some advantages and disadvantages of both modes used as well as challenges and possibilities present in each type of management. The conclusion is that the mixed model used is a viable solution. However, due to the specificities of Distance Learning and the institutions that use it, each one of them shall carry out a detailed assessment on which model to use.

Key words: Management Models; Distance Learning.

1. Introduction

With the progress of Distance Learning (EaD) in Public Higher Education Institutions (IPES), there has been a lot of debate on the space for this modality in the organization structure of the institutions. That is because some of them have chosen to create a dean office specific for EaD, others to create an office linked to the dean office for research and extension studies and others have also created an EaD sector in each department.

EaD has increased the debates on planning, production of material, pedagogical structures, use of Information Technology and Communication (TICs) and included new roles (teacher to prepare content, tutor and instructions designer) in the education sector. It is important to mention that all these elements are interdependent and need to be flexible, have good quality and a good management model.

At the Federal Institute of Espírito Santo (Ifes), the implementation of EaD started in a centralized way, and all activities related to it were under the responsibility of one sector, the Distance Learning Center (Cead/Ifes). As a result of the debate with representatives from other institutes and the initial management experience Cead/Ifes had, as well as the occurrence of operational issues due to the lack of structure from the board of directors as it didn't have a proper campus, the increased demand and also because the support of various sectors was needed for it to work well, it was decided that the way to manage EaD at the Institution would be changed to a semi-decentralized one with the main objective to divulge EaD at the institution.

In 2010 to encourage EaD, the federal government started sending financial resources to the budgetary bodies of IPES that offered distance learning. A complementary amount was being sent, apart from the financing of the federal programs already available. During this time, the distribution of these amounts at Ifes was questioned, and it started being done considering the number of courses and distance learning students in each campus. Receipt of this amount was linked to the division of responsibilities between Cead/Ifes with the campus, so some activities were decentralized and the more general one continued with Cead/Ifes that became a board of directors linked to the teaching dean-office.

This article registers the experience of the EaD managing process at Ifes that went from centralized to semi-decentralized. We intend to promote discussions on the advantages and issues of the model in use at the institution.

2. Brief history of Distance Learning at Ifes

In 2004, Ifes was still called Federal Center of Technological Education of Espírito Santo (Cefetes). A group of teachers started studies to prepare a proposal of a pedagogical project for the university degree in Technology in the Analysis and Development of Systems (TADS) to be offered via distance learning. In 2005, Cefetes participated in the first public notice of the Brazilian Open University (UAB) and filed this project that was approved in April 2006. The offer for this first distance learning course was possible thanks to the incentive from UAB [6].

In 2008 Ifes offered the first technical course via distance learning in partnership with the Brazilian Technical School (e-Tec) program and in 2009 started offering the course for degree in Information Technology. In 2010, Ifes started offering the following post-graduation courses: Information Technology in Education, Professional and Technologic Education, Professional Educations for Youngsters and Adults and Municipal Public Administration, the latter being part of the National Education Program for Public Administration.

Through resolutions 64/2011 and 65/2011 of the Higher Council at Ifes the use of Information Technology and Communication (TICs) and the offer of up to 20% of the curriculum components via distance learning in the Ifes courses were regulated. In 2012, the first offer for the Portuguese Language Degree was made.

The management of all these activities related to EaD is the responsibility of the Distance Learning Education Board of Directors (kept the acronym Cead/Ifes), that is responsible for encouraging and supporting distance learning at Ifes.

3. Initial Management Process

The Distance Learning Center (Cead), at the moment of its creation, was linked to the Teaching Board of Directors of the institution with the objective

to implement distance learning courses at all teaching levels [1].

For Chiavenato [3], the level of centralization / decentralization relates to how much the authority responsible for making decisions is located at the top or spreads across the base of the organization. Currently, the organizations make several attempts to know which hierarchic level is more appropriate at the time to make decisions on each topic.

In the attempt to discover which one is the best EaD management model, Cead/lfes started its management activities in a centralized fashion. This choice was made due to the natural proximity between the initial members of the group and the still low demand, as it was needed only to manage one course. This process to build a management model was done in a participative way, and one result of this choice is that the managing strategy allowed a more full vision of the processes, as all people participated in the decisions made.

At first Cead/lfes was structured with one coordination with seven coordinations under it, namely: Pedagogical Coordination; Planning Coordination; Course Coordination; Coordination of Production of Materials; AVA Coordination (Virtual Learning Environment); Infrastructure Coordination and Area Coordination [1]. Figure 1 shows the initial flowchart.

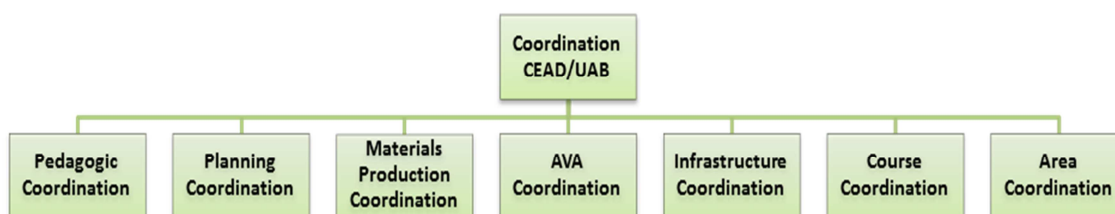


Figure 1. Structure of Cead/lfes in 2007, adapted from Baldo [1]

The Pedagogic Coordination was responsible for assisting and following up on the pedagogical work of the distance learning courses offered and also for solving the issues related to academic register. In 2007, when the first class with 390 students was offered, a demand for service was noted, as despite the existence of presence-based support areas, they were not independent to validate documents related to the academic life of the students. They worked only as a communication bridge between the student's request and Cead/lfes academic register. The exams, for example, were sent to Cead/lfes so that they were sent to the ones responsible for marking them.

The Planning Coordination was in charge of following up on the course

management plans and the admin-financial actions. At first the resource was managed via a foundation. Despite the existing bureaucracy to authorize the requests to the foundation, there was a certain flexibility to acquire materials and equipment.

The Coordination for the Production of Materials was responsible for the production of course materials, and the centralized model caused the demand for these services to increase enormously as new courses were offered. Centralization in this area was relevant as quality control, logistic organization and distribution of materials are performed in this sector.

The Coordination for Virtual Learning Environment (AVA) managed the AVA environment available to offer the courses that in the case of Ifes, is Moodle. This coordination was responsible for the Information Technology actions needed to implement and maintain the distance learning courses offered [1].

The Course coordination was responsible for the organization and management of the distance learning courses offered and reported to the coordination UAB, at Ifes. The Coordination of the Presence-based Areas was responsible for their own organization and management. [1]

With the centralized management model, it was noted that the professionals, regardless of their knowledge areas, are responsible for all courses offered. For Chiavenato [2], centralization has the following advantages: elimination of duplicate efforts in the decision making and cost reduction. Also, for small teams, communication is easier.

This model had a few disadvantages, mainly as a result of the increased offer of courses that generated a higher demand for professionals and adequate physical spaces. Also, there was the distance between the campus managers and their assistants, who were working as scholarship students in the courses. Therefore the campus managers did not participate in the EaD process and were simply viewers. Also, the lack of integration of the students in Ifes' academic life was a serious problem that generated a separation of the students from the distance learning mode, who many times were not seen as part of the institution. This model, as Chiavenato [2] states, brought a disadvantage which was the distance between decision makers and the operational circumstances in the execution of the courses.

4. Current EaD management model at Ifes

When Cefetes became Ifes in 2008, the former Distance Learning Coordination became Distance Learning Board of Directors, reporting to the Teaching Dean office. Cead/Ifes is currently responsible for:

“[...] implementing and editing the graduation, post-graduation distance learning courses, intended for the technical-scientific and social development of the State of Espírito Santo, as well as to promote extension distance learning courses for Ifes workers.” [4]

The name Cead/Ifes continued to be used as it was well known and divulged. However, after the Distance Learning Board of Directors was created, it was necessary to change the way the old coordination was structured, as it no longer met the increasing demand such as new offers and implementation of new courses. Therefore a new model was proposed and implemented in 2011, in which Cead/Ifes had four management sections (Figure 2): Teaching Management; Administration and Planning Management; Management for the Production of Materials and Information Technology. In this structure the Coordination for Distance Learning incentive Government Programs, UAB and e-TEC were also included. A Management Council was also added [5].

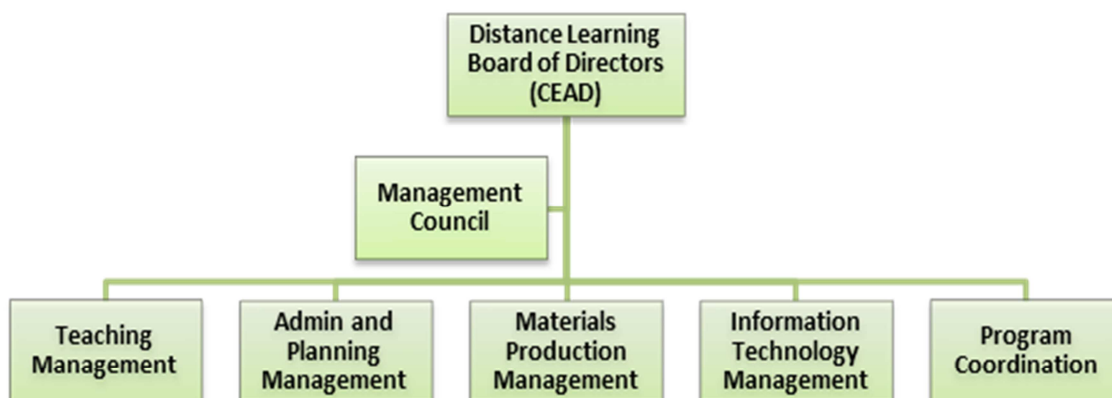


Figure 2. Structure in 2011 of the Distance Learning Board of Directors

The Teaching Management was responsible for activities such as: pedagogical assistance of EaD; follow up on the insertion of EaD in the Institutional development plan (PDI) and in the Institutional Pedagogical Project (PPI) of Ifes; coordination of the actions for new course offers and distance learning curricular components; follow up on the qualification of the ones involved in the offer of distance learning courses and issues related to

academic register.

The Management of Administration and Planning was responsible for the processes of materials and equipment acquisition, management and rendering of accounts of the resources from the financial projects in partnership with the project coordinators and the preparation and budgetary execution of the working plans in which Cead/lfes is involved.

The Materials Production management was responsible for the follow up and execution of the production of printed and virtual materials for distance learning courses as well as the preparation and application of the graphic standards that will be part of these materials.

The Information Technology management (TI) was responsible for: keeping the network infrastructure working well; provide technical support to the EaD actions carried out by lfes; plan and follow up on the implementation of the AVA improvements; manage the integration of the specific EaD systems with the other systems at lfes; support the campus in the configuration of the institutional AVA services, amongst others.

At Program Coordination are the coordinators of Programs UAB and e-Tec, who are responsible for the academic issues and the financial execution of the corresponding programs.

It is important to mention that part of the activities of the old Teaching Coordination, such as the pedagogical follow up and the academic registry control started being executed by the campus under the guideline of the Teaching Management at Cead/lfes. Course Coordination is nowadays linked to the Teaching Management in the campus responsible for the course.

The Planning Coordination became the Management for Administration and Planning and continued with the activities that were under the responsibility of the former coordination, because the rendering of accounts for the federal programs must be done for those who performed their execution, i.e. by Cead/lfes in partnership with the program coordinator.

The former coordination of the production of materials became the Management of Production of Materials and kept the same tasks. The AVA Coordination and the Infrastructure Coordination became the current Technology Information Management , which had their activities increased to be able to meet and support the courses and curricular components offered in the

campus. The area coordination, because it is an independent structure from Ifes, was removed from Cead/Ifes's current structure.

In this new structure, the Management Council was included, which is a consulting body with the objective to turn the EaD management into a more participative one, allowing the professionals to participate in the decisions that involve the EaD at Ifes, in general.

The current management model of the Distance Learning Board of Directors at Ifes has the advantage of sharing responsibilities with the campus that offer the distance courses. For example: the academic register is a very expensive activity in terms of human and technological resources and the centralization is not viable with the increased demand. With the decentralization, each campus is responsible for the academic management of the students and Cead/Ifes is the regulating and consulting body. The course teams (course coordination, educator, instructional designer) are located at the campus and no longer at Cead. Therefore the pedagogical decisions are taken with the teaching managers at the campus, bringing more autonomy and integration to the institute. Therefore, Cead/Ifes again works as the managing body of the pedagogic actions performed by the campus.

The centralization of the production of materials at Cead/Ifes allows, not only the cost reduction in the systemic structure for the EaD material production, but also the sharing and reutilization of the educational objects produced internally. Apart from this, quality control and printing standardization of the materials are managed better. The logistics of production and delivery is another point assisted by the centralization, because having a production team in each campus can become something expensive and compromise the quality, as there is the lack of human resources and need for continuous qualification. Something very similar happens with IT management, as the centralization allows for a more adequate control of the AVA servers and the maintenance actions of the virtual rooms. The acquisition of the equipment is also more optimized, however, the user data is not decentralized and are still kept in a public server for security issues and to ensure access to the information.

5. Final Considerations

The centralized management allows that all decision taken be more standardized and homogeneous, as in the decentralized management the decisions are more free and differentiated [3]. Many entities face the dilemma of centralizing or decentralizing their management. But why not use a mixed system that uses the best of each of the models?

At the Institute, the trend is that Cead/lfes becomes a more consulting body than operational. The idea is that the EaD management stays centralized and the execution of the courses becomes more decentralized and executed by the campus. This is clear in some of them that had around 1,200 presence-based students and welcomed more than 600 students in one go. The need to hire new professionals to meet these courses, mainly in the academic register area .

lfes has most of its distance learning courses financed by federal programs and the centralization of the activities of production of materials, infrastructure and qualification make the execution of the projects easy with the resources received in a homogeneous way, and generates economy of scale in the acquisition of materials and the contracting of third party services, that are performed for all courses together. If these processes were decentralized, there would be problems with the lack of standardization in the execution of the resources received from the projects and the rendering of accounts would be considerably more complicated.

As presented, the management models have advantages and disadvantages. It is up to the institution to determine a cost analysis versus benefit to assess the model to be used. The fact that this model is working at the Institute does not guarantee success for any institution, as the success depends on the available infrastructure, EaD methodology used and the money available to leverage the modality. The EaD management is a dynamic process that is always being transformed and adapting to the reality and needs of the moment.

References:

[1] BALDO, Y.; MOURA, E. S; CARNEIRO, D. V.; NOBRE, I. A.; NUNES, V. B. O modelo de planejamento para desenvolvimento de curso a distância: a experiência do CEFET-ES. In: **XIV Congresso Internacional de Educação a Distância**, Santos-SP, 2008, p.1-10. Anais eletrônicos. Disponível em: <<http://www.abed.org.br/congresso2008/tc/55200850729PM.pdf>>. Acesso em: mar. 2012.

[2] CHIAVENATO, Idalberto. **Introdução à teoria geral da administração**. Rio de Janeiro: Campus, 2003.

[3] CHIAVENATO, Idalberto. **Administração de novos tempos**. Rio de Janeiro: Campus, 2004.

[4] IFES. **Plano de desenvolvimento institucional 2009–2013**. Vitória: Ifes, 2009. Disponível em: <<http://www.ifes.edu.br>>. Acesso em: abr. 2012.

[5] IFES. **Regimento interno da diretoria de educação a distância**. Vitória: Ifes, 2011. Disponível em: <http://www.ifes.edu.br>. Acesso em: abr. 2012.

[6] NOBRE, I. A.; NUNES, V. B.; BALDO, Y.; MOURA, E. S; CARNEIRO, D. V. Comunicação e interação entre os atores responsáveis pela gestão EAD - experiência do Curso Superior de Tecnologia em Análise e Desenvolvimento de Sistemas em EAD – CEFETES. In: **XIV Congresso Internacional de Educação a Distância**, Santos-SP, 2008, p1-10. Anais eletrônicos. Disponível em: <<http://www.abed.org.br/congresso2008/tc/55200853510PM.pdf>>. Acesso em: mar. 2012.