

DISTANCE EDUCATION IN BRAZIL: PROGRAMS, FUNDING AND INCENTIVES

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ABSTRACT

Distance Education (DE) has been, throughout history, an important alternative to the expansion of the educational opportunities. However, so that there is a real expansion and the offering of a quality teaching it is necessary that the state authority direct investments to the educational system development. Thus, this article intends to identify which are the existing programs, as well as the ways of funding and incentives that are being used by the state authority to the development and distribution of DE programs in Brazil. To that end, bibliographical researches and lookups into websites from institutions involved in distance education were carried out. By this survey was possible to identify the main programs, as well as the different characteristics of this teaching modality and its current procedures.

Keywords: Distance Education, State Funding, Programs.

1- Introduction

Distance Education (DE) is an old way to pass knowledge on. There are records of its use back in the nineteenth century. The DE history in Brazil dates back more than a hundred years, among the main world developing countries in this teaching modality, especially up until the 1970's. At this time, excellent programs were created, helping to democratize the quality education and to improve the assistance to people from disadvantaged regions. ^[1]

However, there was a time of stagnation which lasted up until the end of the millennium, the growing return in the last decade, mainly due to the improved accessibility to computing services and the popularity of the internet.

According to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) ^[2] around 67,9 million of the Brazilian people have access to the internet. This number increases year after year. Therefore, the DE ^[3] might be the way to fast improvement of higher education access and, mainly, the solution to enhance the education quality adjusting it to the twentieth first century demands.

Thus, this article intends to identify which are the existing programs, as well as the ways of funding and incentives that are being used by the state authority to the development and distribution of DE programs in Brazil.

To that end, bibliographical researches and lookups were carried out in order to identify the state authority reported data concerning the programs, the current rules, the structural conditions to DE, as well as the incentive sources.

The article is written in five sections in addition to this introductory section. The second one works with bibliographical review about the Distance Education including the legal perspectives and principles concerning DE project management. The third section is about the creation of the Brazil Open University (UAB). In the next part the main existing programs were identified and, after that, the funding. At last, the sixth and final section presents final considerations.

2 – Distance Education

2.1- Legal perspectives

The DE is normalized in the Brazilian legal system by the Law of Directives and Bases of National Education (LDB) ^[4] and decrees. The decree 2494/10 ^[5] demands that the offer of DE courses must pass through an examination which requires a minimum criterion to be obeyed.

Therefore, the new LDB ^[4] made some advancement possible, once the DE now exists in basic education as well as in higher education including the use of several media resources in its practice. According to the Law, it is up to the state authority to encourage the development and dissemination of DE programs, in all its levels, teaching modalities and ongoing education.

Furthermore, it ensures special treatment to DE, including: a) reduced transmission costs in commercial channels regarding image and sound broadcasting; b) concession to channels with exclusively educational purpose; and a minimum reserved time, without a commitment to state authority, by the commercial channels concessionaires, and others.

The registration of DE institution offers must be required to the state by higher education institutions (IES) which are already registered at the federal system or at the state systems and the Federal District, according to the LDB. The requirement is made through documents, showing evidence of the existence of physical, technological and human resources (RH) structure, which has to be fit and sufficient according to the requirements given by law and their own quality parameters. ^[6]

The laws already passed, up until now, indicate a wider direction looking for the integration of DE to public and private universities goals. ^[3]

2.2- DE Project Management elements.

One of the fundamental elements to achieve success and perpetuation on DE course is the Project management. It must focus the pedagogical teaching and application content, measuring the cost/benefit relationship of the given courses. ^[7]

Once the DE projects may present different views, various language combinations and educational resources, MEC's Distance Education State Secretariat (SEED) has published the Quality Reference SEED/MEC ^[8]. The document serves as a guiding, aiding state authority legal acts relating to DE regulation, overseeing and evaluation specific processes.

In this context ^{[9][10]}, a DE management system must aim for elements such as: a) Planning, organizing and controlling new Information and communication Technologies (TICs); b) Conception and organizing administrative processes; c) Evaluating systems planning and execution; d) Control over system problems regarding the student support; e) Human resources, financial and accounting organizing, and so on.

The challenge is to encourage the development and DE courses demand looking for alternative funding sources so that the system does not maintain itself depending only on the students. ^[8] The DE requires investments ^[11], mainly in technological resources, once this methodology needs technology, investments and creativity, being able, furthermore, to provide education to a great part of the people who need studies.

To urge the DE in public institutions, the government acts in various ways supporting researches in new higher education teaching methodologies, which support itself on the TICs.

A significant act was the creation, in 2006, of the Brazil Open University (UAB) ^[12]. The system is made of public universities which offer themselves, by means of the DE methodology, higher level courses to people experiencing difficulties to achieve university education. The service aims people in general, but the basic education teachers have priority in it, followed by managers and education professionals in general.

3 – Brazil Open University (UAB)

The UAB system ^[12] deals with the local education demands among the IES, state and municipal governments. The agreement of local leaderships and the IES into the UAB system happens under the Education Formation Support Permanent State Forums.

The UAB has been created by decree^[13], aiming the DE development. The course demands expansion and internalization throughout the country. Furthermore, it encourages the cooperation between the government, states and municipalities and stimulates the ongoing formation centers through physical support units in strategic locations.

Requests for new DE units creation is made to the Distance Education Board of Directors from the Higher Education People Improvement Coordination (CAPES), after State Forums decision, deciding which teaching institutions and the courses to be implemented in municipalities or micro regions through the physical support units.^[8]

Initially, the developed courses in the UAB system area came out from announcements, the first one, published in 2005 made possible the UAB system to be implemented, through courses proposal selection, integration and articulation, presented exclusively by IFES and the physical support unit's proposal, presented by states and municipalities.

Furthermore, the second announcement, in 2006, allowed the involvement of all public institutions, including those from state and municipal areas. In 2007, the UAB system sent sources to the IFES so they could increase the bibliographical archive from physical support units. Books have been acquired regarding areas from given courses. In 2008, the UAB system made possible the creation of courses in Administration, Public Management and other technical areas.

Currently^[12] there are 94 institutions being part of the UAB system, among Federal Universities, State Universities and Science and Technology Federal Education Institutions (IFETs), achieving 747 units throughout the country.

In order to direct the maintainers actions, states and/or municipalities, and to offer an evaluation basis to investments that must be made regarding the suitability of public buildings. CAPES provides at its website a minimum physical support unit structure proposal.

Equipment acquisition depends on the given courses and the IES guiding. Based on this structure, the interested institution has to send the project to CAPES in order to obtain approval and receive sources. The amount

to acquire some equipments and furniture will depend on the courses and students number the unit intends to have.

The remuneration regarding physical support units, basic and ongoing formation acting coordinators and teachers from UAB system is made through scholarships provided by MEC's Higher Education People Improvement Coordination (CAPES) and paid by the Education Development Nation Fund (FNDE). The scholarships last a maximum of four years and have pre-established values, it is not possible to accumulate them. The other professionals' remuneration shall be borne by the unit maintainer.

4- Distance Education programs offered by MEC

In addition to the DE system organized by UAB, the government has released other programs in partnership with states and municipalities to expand and democratize teaching. The chart number 1 presents a summary of the main MEC offered programs, with CAPES/FNDE funding.

BAZIL E-TEC NETWORK	
Objective	To serve the distance Professional and technological education
Offer	Technical high school courses
MEC	Financial assistance
Partners	State, City and Federal District
Counterpart	Structure, Human Resources, activities maintenance and other items
Structure	Same model as UAB
PROFMAT	
Objective	Medium term, to achieve the Mathematics teacher's formation throughout the national territory
Offer	Blended <i>Stricto sensu</i> post graduation studies
MEC	Financial assistance
Partners	Mathematics Brazilian Society and public IES linked to UAB system
Counterpart	Structure, Human Resources, activities maintenance and other items
Structure	Same model as UAB
Prolinfant	
Objective	To enable professionals on infant teaching, who work on day care centers and public preschool and, non-profit-seeking, do not have specific formation to teach
Offer	High school course, regular modality
MEC	Financial assistance
Partners	Sate, municipalities and Federal District
Counterpart	Structure, Human Resources, activities maintenance and other items
Strutcture	Same model as UAB
MEDIA IN EDUCATION	
Objective	To provide ongoing formation to pedagogical use on information and communication Technologies – TV and video, computers, radios and printable matter. Aiming basic education teachers.
Offer	Basic extension modules, intermediate and advanced specialization
MEC	Financial assistance
Partners	SEED, Education Departments, UAB system public IFES

Counterpart	Structure, Human Resources, activities maintenance and other items
Structure	Same model as UAB
SCHOOL TV	
Objective	Teachers improving and updating, enhancing the teaching/learning and improving the teaching quality
Offer	Television series, Foreigner documentaries and national production
MEC	Financial assistance
Partners	MEC
Counterpart	Structure, Human Resources, activities maintenance and other items
Structure	TV channel, allowing some programs to be downloaded from Public Domains Website, links
FormAction through School	
Objective	Teachers improving and updating, enhancing the teaching/learning and improving the teaching quality
Offer	Ongoing formation program
MEC	Financial assistance
Partners	FNDE + SEED/MEC
Counterpart	Structure, Human Resources, activities maintenance and other items
Structure	Same model as UAB
PUBLIC MANAGEMENT FORMATION NATIONAL PROGRAM (PNAP)	
Objective	Training professionals with wide public management knowledge, able to act under federal, state and municipal level range, managing with competence and under ethical guidance the governmental and non-governmental organizations
Offer	Bachelor's degree courses on public management, Public Management Specialization and/or Municipal Public Management and Health Management Specialization
MEC	Financial assistance
Partners	Higher education institutions, which are part of UAB system
Counterpart	Structure, Human Resources, activities maintenance and other items
Structure	Same model as UAB
ONGOING FORMATION PROGRAM	
Objective	Training municipal and state level education teachers who act as Special Education professionals
Offer	Extension or Specialization
MEC	Financial assistance
Partners	Public IES, Municipal, State and Federal District Education Department
Counterpart	Structure, Human Resources, activities maintenance and other items
Structure	Same model as UAB

SOURCE: adapted from data obtained at www.mec.gov.br (MEC, 2012)

Chart 1. Summary from the main existing programs

5- Funding

In all programs, the financial assistance actions, after approval, are made through agreements with partnership companies, the transferences are conducted under predetermined schedule, with subsequent technical and accountability report disclosure required of the beneficiary IFES.

When MEC does not offer financial support to infrastructure expenses or equipment acquisition and other money expenses, it provides funds, through

announcements, course material production, teachers and tutors formation and course offers.

An example of that is the financial support to public IES, improving the offered courses infrastructure under the UAB system range in 2010. CAPES have made two announcements offering sources to the equipment and furniture acquisition to equip DE units, courses coordination, guidance rooms and physical support units.

One of them has given support to course material production and virtual learning environment, academic management and online conference service development, as well as other actions regarding the improvement of distance courses. The other one has encouraged integration and convergence among traditional and distance education on public IES, federal and state level, which are part of UAB system, through encouragement to TICs use on traditional graduation educational level.

To MEC ^[8] the use of TICs on traditional education favors the implementation of groundbreaking teaching/learning methodologies and practices that make possible integration and convergence among IES traditional and distance education.

The source transference, by MEC's Higher Education Department, is done through several indicators which are calculated according to academic annual data, the main one is the Equivalent Student. ^[14]

The financial support is also given through remuneration, study and research scholarships granted by CAPES and paid by FNDE, to professionals who act on basic and ongoing formation and UAB system physical support units. Those with the mentioned scholarships receive only one of it by period, even if they execute more than one role.

It is possible to see progress made regarding Brazil's DE funding, making possible the existence of several programs, scholarships concession and an improvement on partnerships between the Federal Government and States, Municipalities and Federal District.

6 - Considerations

This article had as its main objective to identify which are the existing DE programs in Brazil, as well as funding ways and incentive used by state authority so it might be improved and how it is being disseminated.

Among the available programs are the ones offered by UAB, Brazil e-Tec, ProFmat, ProInfant, Education Media, PNAP and the Ongoing Formation Program.

It is seen that, in order to implement the DE there are important matters to be planned. Therefore, making and managing of a consistent project is something essential, for it oversees all of this matters. ^[7]

It is also possible to notice that the investments, ^[11], are still short, with only a few announcements which allow proper equipment acquisition and technical structure. However, the cost by DE student is relevant while making the expansion and investments annual budgets. It becomes hard to make a cost preview once the institutions seize existent locations and use, most of the times, the same professionals acting on traditional education.

Thus, it is worth the comments ^[3] on how the state investment is important to the educational systems development. It makes essential the cooperation with the private sector, tied up to the investment public politics on higher education and ongoing professionals formation by state authority so that open and distance education can be widened.

Furthermore, the strengthening, expansion and DE offer to improve its quality and population range throughout the country depend on projects with high quality standards, technical and human structure inside institutions which are part of the program and, thus, to ensure the source transference and government support to be part of the public politics, making sure that the system is going to last.

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