Maria Renata da Cruz Duran[1] and
Celso José da Costa[2]

Brazilian Open University System: a public policy on distance learning education in Brazil (2005-2010)

Abstract:

The Brazilian Open University System (UAB) was launched in December 2005. It is a network system that brings together public higher education institutions, municipalities and state governments, and federal government, specially on CAPES (Coordination Office for the Development of Higher Education Staff) by the DED (Distance Education Division), to expand and offer to inland cities higher education using the e-learning model. In this paper, we describe the contribution of DED/CAPES during the management of the UAB System from 2005 to 2010 to the system.

Keywords: distance education, teacher training, higher education.

Summary

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[1] M.ª R. da Cruz Duran, graduated in History from the State University of São Paulo (Unesp/Franca), accomplished her Master's and PhD degrees in Social and Cultural History at Unesp/Franca, and conducted postgraduate studies in Public Policies for Teacher Training at the School of Education of the University of São Paulo (USP). She was a consultant for the Organization of Ibero-American States for the General Coordination of Academic Articulation of the Distance Education Division (DED) of Capes.

[2] C. J. da Costa, graduated in Mathematics from the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ) and accomplished his Master's and PhD degree in Mathematics at the National Institute of Pure and Applied Mathematics (Impa). He is the director of the Mathematics Institute of the Federal University of the state of Rio de Janeiro and the co-founder of the Cederj consortium (Center of Distance Higher Education of Rio de Janeiro). He was responsible for the Distance Education Division of CAPES (Coordination Office for the Development of Higher Education Staff) from 2006 to 2010.

El sistema Universidad Abierta de Brasil: una política pública de educación a distancia en Brasil (2005-2010)

Extracto:

El sistema Universidad Abierta de Brasil (UAB) se puso en marcha en diciembre de 2005. Se trata de un sistema de red que reúne a las instituciones públicas de educación superior, a los municipios y a los Gobiernos de los Estados, y al Gobierno federal, especialmente en la CAPES (Coordenação de Aperfeccionamiento de Personal Nível Superior) a través del DED (Divisão de Educação a Distância), para extender y ofrecer en las ciudades interiores la educación superior utilizando el modelo de *e-learning*. En este trabajo, se describe la contribución de la DED/CAPES al sistema durante la gestión del sistema UAB entre 2005 y 2010.

Palabras claves: educación a distancia, formación del profesorado, educación superior.

1. INTRODUCTION

Edgar Roquette Pinto, from Rio de Janeiro, donated equipment from the Rádio Sociedade do Rio de Janeiro to the Brazilian government in 1936, leveraging the creation of Radio MEC and setting the course for a relationship established between education, technology and communication. Therefore, the relationship between education, communication and technology was not new to Brazilians in the XX century, but the legislation that regulated experiments in the area was only passed in the 1970s and ruled under the following terms: «Education Councils may authorize educational experiences with systems other than those set out in this Law to ensure the validity of the studies being carried out» (Brasil, 1971). Therefore, for the purpose of regulation and certification, Distance Education fell under Article 64 of Law 5692 of 1971. Besides this meaning, this model could also be related to Articles 24 or 25 that specifically regulated supplementary adult education, better represented by the well-known Instituto Universal Brasileiro founded in the mid 1940's, which was a reference both for what people considered distance education to be back then and for the dissemination of the model in Brazil.

According to Pretti (2005), distance education only gained recognition with the National Education Law no. 9394, enacted on December 20th, 1996. It set out, among other prerogatives, that the government authorities should incentivize «the development and spreading distance education programs at all levels and models of teaching and continuing Education», according to Article 80. As in the National Education Law (LDB), the National Education Council (CNE) has also kept a flexible and experimental model for educational projects:

(...) distance education only gained recognition with the National Education Law no. 9394, enacted on December 20th, 1996

> «Of course, distance education projects can offer relevant contributions to national education. Its powers are extremely wide, flexible and diversified, because it is an educational strategy which breaks the limits of time and space inherent to formal face-to-face lessons. Students study and learn at their own pace, without the need to regularly attend a school and comply with legally established days and hours of lessons. Obviously, it does not mean that we propose to substitute the traditional face-to-face strategy, which is paramount, especially in basic education. However, in Brazil, a country of continental dimensions with profound and chronic educational gaps that have accumulated over time, in addition to continuing education, necessary in any country, distance education may provide supplementary educational opportunities to large groups of adult workers who have failed to complete regular schooling at normal age» (Brasil, 1997)[3].

«Distance education is a type of education that enables self-learning, with the mediation of systematically organized educational aids, presented in different information support systems, used in isolation or in combination, and transmitted by different means of communication» (Brasil, 1998)

The effect from the legislation incentive was, as expected, an increase in the offer of courses in the area, which may be proven by the large number of opinion reports issued by the National Education Council in respect of the proposal for courses in this model.

Nevertheless, according to historian Giolo (2008), there were still doubts as to what could be defined as «distance education» since not every proposal put forward met the expectations at that time, and most proposals were presented by private teaching institutions. These questions seemed to have become popular so much so that in a new decree, decree no. 2494, published on February 10th, 1998, in which they tried to define «distance education» with a view to regulating the courses offered at the time. From this decree onwards, it should be considered that:

> «Distance education is a type of education that enables self-learning, with the mediation of systematically organized educational aids, presented in different information support systems, used in isolation or in combination, and transmitted by different means of communication» (Brasil, 1998).

Nonetheless, in Administrative Act no. 301 issued by MEC on April 7th, 1998, and published in the Official Gazette of April 9th, 1998, Minister Paulo Renato de Souza defined the general rules to be complied with by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in order to obtain accreditation for distance education courses. HEIs were requested to present a qualified team and history of this model as well as relevant statutes and proof of interest of stakeholders or other parties.

For some education scholars, decree 2494 was very short (it has only 13 Articles) so it demanded further clarification and even instruments for setting out standards for the area. For this reason, one of the areas that would again be discussed in decree no. 2561, published on April 27th, 1998, was the role and competence of the state and municipal systems in the offer of distance education intended for supplementary basic education of youth and adults and for High school education. At this time, such competence was extended to professional education at technical level.

[3] Consultation on basic and High school education (supplementary) with the use of a distance education method. Approved on November 3rd, 1997.

The 2000-2010 National Education Plan, consolidated by Law no. 10172, of January 9th, 2001, was fundamental to settle any doubts about the role that distance education would have from then on:

> «In the process of making teaching universal and democratic, especially in Brazil, where educational gaps and regional inequalities are very high, existing educational challenges may find in distance education a complementary means of unchallenged efficiency. (…) For all programs offered for distance education, we must certainly enable replication of initiatives. Educational and cultural programs must be incentivized in the general spirit of freedom of the press, secured by the Federal Constitution, although subject to quality standards which need to be the object of concern not only of governmental bodies but also of the producers themselves by means of a self-regulatory system» (Brasil, 2001).

This new incentive to the model would be based on specific goals and objectives, namely:

> «6.3. Objectives and goals: 1. The Union shall establish, within one year, standards for the accreditation of the institutions that provide distance courses. 2. Establish, within two years, in cooperation with the Union and the States and Municipalities, ethical and aesthetical standards upon which production of distance education programs will be evaluated. 4. Guarantee that actions by the Ministries of Education, Culture, Employment, Science and Technology and Communications are integrated for the development of distance education in the country by expanding the technology infrastructure and by reducing costs of communication and information services to create, in two years' time, a program that guarantees this collaboration. 8. Extend the offer of distance education programs for the youth and adults, especially the offer of basic education with special consideration for the potential of the radio broadcasting channels and to serve the rural population. 11. Start, soon after the approval of the Plan, to offer higher education distance courses, especially for teacher training in basic education. 13. Incentivize, especially at universities, training of human resources for distance education. 14. Give financial and institutional support to research in the area of distance education» (Brasil, 2001).

With clearly defined objectives, the legislation was revised. Decrees such as that of December 19th, 2005 (no. 5622) and that of December 12th, 2007 (no. 6303) regulated Article 80 of the National Education Law (LDB) again on themes such as expansion of face-to-face meetings, including evaluations, compulsory internship, defending theses for completion of courses and laboratory activities, bringing the Brazilian experience closer to that of the Spanish Distance Education[4] model, according to Minister Fernando Haddad.

Concurrently, the use of this teaching model was limited to basic education, where distance education could only be practiced «as supplementary study or in emergency situations» (Giolo, 2008, p. 14) and, with the issue of Administrative Act no. 2 of January 10th, 2007 it was established that distance education courses should be included in HEIs' development plans to gain a more permanent and interlinked nature than ever before.

[4] Statement made during a debate promoted by the newspaper Folha de S. Paulo, on March 25th, 2008.

Law no. 10861/2004, which regulates the National System of Evaluation of Higher Education (Sinaes), was fully applied to distance education, which meant that criteria for higher education evaluation, whichever the model, would gradually be aligned with a view to standardization. According to Schlünzen Junior (2009), this equivalence supported the legitimacy of distance education courses, which are still seen in an unfavorable light because of lack of knowledge of the model, in the shared opinion of the members of the National Education Council (CNE):

> «It is true that the first distance education programs gained a very bad reputation and were considered second class education. However, it is also true that many critics of these programs were not aware of the deficiencies encountered also in traditional education» (Brasil, 2010).

In addition to the decrees and administrative acts mentioned here, other rules and regulations were set out both by MEC[5] and CNE[6]. Therefore, the regulation of the process of distance education in Brazil contributed to the qualification of the model and, according to Giolo (2008), to meeting a specific social demand and creating a market niche. In both cases, the provision, under Article 87, § 4 of the National Education Law (LDB), whereby «by the end of the Education Decade only teachers with higher education or qualified by training in service will be admitted» led to the development of teacher training courses in the distance model throughout the country (Litto, 2009).

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In this scenario, we saw a great mobilization of basic education teachers, either as a result of lack of teachers in this area or to meet a government requirement, leading to a public action in the sense of fostering the expansion in this field of education in Brazil. UAB was one of the main, if not the major, government initiatives in this field (Gatti and Barretto, 2009).

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[5] It is well known that distance education regulation by MEC is directly governed by decrees and administrative acts. Among the decrees featured: no. 5622, dated December 19th, 2005, which regulates Article 80 of Law no. 9394, dated December 20th,1996 (LDB-Education Law); that of no. 5773, dated May 9th, 2006, which provides for the exercise of the functions of regulation, supervision and evaluation of higher education institutions and undergraduate and sequential higher education courses in the federal education system; and that of no. 6303, dated December 12th, 2007, which alters provisions of decrees no. 5622, dated December 19th, 2005, which lays down the guidelines and fundamentals of national education, and 5773, dated May 9th, 2006, which provides for the exercise and functions of regulation, supervision and evaluation of higher education institutions and graduation and sequential higher education courses in the federal education system. Among administrative acts featured: no. 1, dated January 10th, 2007; no. 2 (revoked), dated January 10th, 2007; no. 40, dated December 13th, 2007; and no. 10, dated July 2nd, 2009, that sets out criteria for the exemption of in loco evaluation and other provisions.

[6] The National Education Council, «instituted by Law 9131, dated 25/11/1995, for the purpose of collaborating with the formulation of the National Education Policy and exercise normative, deliberative and advisory attributions of the Ministry of Education» (available at: www.mec.gov.br; access on: June 18th, 2011), highlighted the following items as important documents for the theme of distance education on its virtual Page on MEC's site: CNE/CES Opinion no. 78/96, approved on October 7th, 1996; CNE/CEB Opinion no. 15/1997, approved on November 3rd, 1997; CNE/CEB Opinion no. 10/2001, approved on April 3rd, 2001; CNE/CEB Opinion no. 28/2001, approved on August 6th, 2001; CNE/CEB Opinion no. 41/2002, approved on December 2nd, 2002; CNE/CEB Opinion no. 31/2004, approved on October 6th, 2004; CNE/CEB Opinion no. 17/2005, approved on August 3rd, 2005; CNE/CES Opinion no. 14/2006, approved on February 1st, 2006; CNE/CES Opinion no. 241/2006, approved on October 4th, 2006; CNE/CES Opinion no. 195/2007, approved on September 13th, 2007; CNE/CES Opinion no. 197/2007, approved on September 13th, 2007; CNE/CEB Opinion no. 25/2008, approved on December 2nd, 2008; CNE/CES Opinion no. 238/2009, approved on August 7th, 2009; CNE/CES Opinion no. 18/2010, approved on January 27, 2010; CNE/CES Opinion no. 195/2010, approved on October 6th, 2010; CNE/CES Opinion no. 267/2010, approved on December 10th, 2010; CNE/CES Resolution no. 4, dated February 16th, 2011; CNE/CP Opinion no. 3/2011, approved on May 31st, 2011; and CNE/CES Opinion no. 267/2010, approved on December 10th, 2010.

1.1. Implementation of Brazilian Open University System

UAB was officially established in December 2005, when the Distance Department for Education (SEED/MEC)[7] launched a bidding process inviting on one hand the municipal and state administrations to submit proposals to host face-to-face centers, and on the other, higher education public institutions to submit proposals for higher education distance programs. The invitation to tender outlined the main intended lines of federal cooperation: municipalities and states would be responsible for preparing and maintaining the infrastructure of face-to-face centers, while HEI would be responsible for developing and delivering courses as well as enrolling students. The Ministry of Education (MEC) would bear the full costs of the academic effort of teaching institutions, which included offering grants to teachers and tutors.

In spite of the short time for communicating the invitation to tender and the tight deadline for submitting proposals, the interest was surprising: MEC received proposals for the creation of more than 800 face-to-face centers and 40 HEIs submitted proposals for more than 150 courses. Analysis of the proposals started in May and extended until December 2006, and was conducted by a team of specialists invited by MEC and, at completion, 247 face-to-face centers and 40 HEIs were selected, of which 29 federal universities, 10 federal institutes (former Cefets) as well as Fiocruz.

The teaching model proposed for UAB was similar to that of Cederj, with semi virtual courses, and face-to-face centers played a strong role in that structure (Morán, 2009). Therefore, from the start, implementation of face-to-face centers received special attention from MEC because the concept was new for city administrations and state departments of education. And, further, because the precarious financial state of many municipalities hindered allocation of resources for this purpose.

According to the guidelines for DE quality issued by SEED[8], face-to-face centers should offer physical and personnel infrastructure capable of providing technological, scientific and instrumental support to courses. Physical infrastructure should include study and practice areas in sizes adequate to the number of students and the nature of the courses offered, in particulara library with minimum collections compatible with the needs of students, a laboratory of computers with access to broadband internet, physical space and equipment for web conference, educational laboratories for practical activities, coordination rooms, academic department office and rooms where students could be attended by tutors, as well as other equipment such as televisions, telephone lines, printers, etc.

Face-to-face centers should also provide personnel support, with tutors and a facilities coordinator. Those tutors are teachers who help students to develop their activities, clarifying questions students have in the specific content and, therefore, they are main players in the learning mediation process. The center coordinator, on the other hand, is the main person responsible for the good performance of the administrative and educational processes developed at the unit.

MEC anticipated the difficulties municipalities would have in allocating resources to face-to-face centers, so it partially assumed the implementation of these units. For support of the physical infrastructure, MEC allocated to each center a basic kit consisting of 36 computers and transmission systems for Internet connection. For support of personnel infrastructure, MEC was responsible for the payment of grants to face-to-face center coordinators and contact tutors[9]. Meanwhile, on June 8th, 2006, through decree no. 5800, UAB became part of the federative cooperation system that works in an integrated, joint fashion as a public higher education system under a regime of collaboration between the Union and federative bodies.

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[7] Invitation to Tender, 1, dated 14 December 2005.

[8] Source: www.mec.gov.br; on 6 June 2010.

[9] At present, UAB face-to-face support centers are being re-adapted, which is a result of an evaluation conducted by SEED in April and May 2010. In this report, face-to-face support centers were classified according to the infrastructure available for students, including laboratories, libraries and Internet access.

On October 18th, 2006, a second invitation to tender for UAB was published in the *Official Gazette*, number 01 SEED/MEC/2006. The terms were the same as for the previous tender; it provided for expansion of the number of face-to-face centers and the inclusion of new institutions, whose analysis started in July 2007. In order to balance out the system, strategic guidelines were introduced by UAB's executive directors to serve as guidance for the selection committee to choose new face-to-face centers and courses. These guidelines established that UAB global network would have one thousand units (centers) in order to provide nationwide coverage and that the methodology for choosing these centers would be based on the division of the Brazilian territory into 556 micro-regions, according to data published that year by IBGE (the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics). They also took into account the population density of the micro region, plus the number of high school graduates, the geographical extension and the difficulties in travelling –these were determining factors to establish supplementary units– (Costa and Pimentel, 2009).

As to the offer of graduation courses, it was established that each HEI would act in its home state, with specialization and continuing education courses being offered in their geographical region. Finally, exclusive courses for initial and continuing training of teachers would be selected. As a result of this selection of new face-to-face centers and courses, we had 557 face-to-face support units and 74 HEIs in the UAB System.

From 2006 to 2007, UAB was managed under SEED/MEC. After Law no. 11.502 was enacted, dated July 11th, 2007, it was established that initial and continuing training of basic education teachers would be under the responsibility of Capes. UAB started to be managed by Capes after the first 19 months under SEED management; we can say that Capes was the headquarters of UAB.

Capes is a funding agency that until then focused on research and professional development of high level staff in the country. However, after enactment of Law no. 11.502 and under Administrative Act no. 609, dated May 20th, 2008, Capes went on to have a Technical-Scientific Council of Basic Education (CTC-EB), Basic Education Divisions for face-to-face settings (DEB) as well as a Distance Education Division (DED), with focus on the National Policy for Teacher Training: that was the new Capes.

Among other rules relating to DE[10], under Article 79 of Administrative Act no. 609, dated May 20th, 2008, the Distance Education Division shall:

> «I. Articulate, foster and evaluate public higher education institutions and municipal and state face-to-face support centres in order to offer quality courses at higher education level in the distance education model, particularly to Universidade Aberta do Brasil (UAB); II. Subsidise the formulation of policies for initial and continuing education of teachers, bringing the potential of the use of the methodology of distance education; III. Support the initial and continuing training of basic education professionals and public administration managers by providing grants and grants to teachers and tutors in public higher education institutions and coordinators at face-to-face centres, especially UAB; IV. Plan, foster and evaluate the offer of higher education courses in the distance education model provided by public institutions and physical and personnel infrastructure for face-to-face support centres to support training of public administration managers; V. Promote the evaluation of programs and/or projects within its area; VI. Coordinate the preparation of managerial reports and organization unit activities within its area; and VII. Control expenses relating to the budget for its activities».

[10] Capes site (www.capes.gov.br) has an area especially dedicated to UAB (www.uab.capes.gov.br). Among other references, there are ordinances of this department with regard to DE: Administrative Act no. 1369, dated December 7th, 2010; Administrative Act no. 7, dated February 9th, 2011; Administrative Act no. 318, dated April 2nd, 2009; Administrative Acts nos. 370 and 371, dated March 29th, 2010; Administrative Act no. 75, dated April 14th, 2010; Administrative Act no. 79, dated April 14th, 2010; Administrative Act no. 78, dated April 14th, 2010; Administrative Act no. 77, dated April 14th, 2010; Administrative Act no. 40, dated January 21st, 2010; Ordinance no. 2, dated January 10th, 2007; Administrative Act no. 802, dated August 18, 2009; Inter-ministerial Ordinance no. 127, dated May 29th, 2008; ordinance no. 40, dated December 12th, 2007; Capes/CNPq Joint Administrative Act no. 01, dated December 12th, 2007.

The Distance Education Division, to which UAB is subordinated under CAPES, and until 2011 was formed by the General Coordination for Academic Articulation[11], the General Coordination for Supervision and Development[12], the General Coordination for Technology and Information Policies[13], and the General Coordination for Centre and Nucleus Infrastructure[14]. And was responsible for the executive management of UAB from 2005 to 2010, in cooperation with state and federal institutions, according to four main macro actions: articulation, development, evaluation and introduction of the distance education model in the public sector nationwide.

This articulation was expected to build a network of higher education institutions, city administrations and states capable of providing high-quality higher education, especially in regions that lacked opportunities. Development and evaluation could help strengthening the quality control of all UAB processes. In this respect, it is important to note Capes' tradition in the control of the quality of postgraduate courses in Brazil by combining development with evaluation. Finally, the executive directors of the Distance Education Division worked toward a model of public distance education, which nonetheless aimed to embrace regional and institutional diversities.

In strict terms, UAB was not established as a traditional higher education institution and was not classified as open, since it did not have its own teachers, it did not grant titles to students and because admission to UAB depended on educational pre-requisites that must be verified by means of public entrance examinations

In strict terms, UAB was not established as a traditional higher education institution and was not classified as open, since it did not have its own teachers, it did not grant titles to students and because admission to UAB depended on educational pre-requisites that must be verified by means of public entrance examinations. Therefore, the UAB system is a more appropriate name, since it was a cooperation network that included higher education public institutions, the federal government, and city and state administrations.

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[11] On SisUAB, each HEI had a webpage with general data on the institution and also on UAB's institutional coordinators at the HEIs, course coordinators, tutors and other academic players of the system. General Coordination Dept. for Academic Coordination (CGAAc, Portuguese acronym) was responsible for organizing and entering this information and it was also responsible for the configuration of the courses offered at the centres. At first, CGAAc checked the compatibility of the educational projects for courses presented by HEIs with UAB's proposal to be funded by the Distance Education Division (DED)/Capes. This compatibility check was carried out in a meeting of expert committees that represented each area and analysed the feasibility of funding each educational project proposed by HEIs. CGAAc would then match course projects with regional demands, analysing the map of offers proposed by HEIs via SisUAB. The criteria to decide on which courses would be offered included the recommendation from state forums and information referring to centre infrastructure and legality as well as the ability of HEIs to offer these courses.

[12] The General Coordination Dept. for Supervision and Funding (CGFO in Portuguese) managed the two main funding aspects of the UAB System: total expenses of HEIs in offering courses at the UAB face-to-face support centres and meeting the demands of the Grants Management System (SGB in Portuguese), registering and authorizing payments to grant holders under the UAB system. Until mid 2010, these actions were guided by specific resolutions of the National Fund for Education Development (FNDE), and were developed in partnership with the commission that evaluated the first UAB invitation to tender.

[13] In a joint effort with Capes' General Coordination Dept. for Information Technology to cope with a complex register and management of the UAB System, the General Coordination Dept. for Technology and Information (CGTI, Portuguese acronym) developed a management system for the UAB called SisUAB, which is a support platform for executing, carrying out follow-up and managing UAB processes, whereby hyperlinks and search tools contributed to information systematization and support to managerial decision making. SisUAB included detailed information on the courses offered and a dynamic and detailed overview of the infrastructure of the centres. Co-responsible for SisUAB implementation, CGTI also operated in other areas: invitation to tender to provide equipment for HEI and centre infrastructure, implementation of a global web conference system, connectivity with the internet at the centres and administration of the UAB Virtual Work Environment (Atuab in the Portuguese acronym). One of UAB's virtual work environments was created in mid 2007, based on the Moodle platform, where coordinators of courses, UAB and centres were registered. Overall, the platforms featured discussion forums, document folders among other things.

[14] The centre is the link of the UAB system where DED, HEIs and municipal and state administrations work together, each with their own responsibilities. The main task of the General Coordination Dept. for Centre Infrastructure (CGIP) was therefore to monitor both the implementation and continuous management of the centres. The main aspects to be followed refer to the centre infrastructure and if they were adequate for the course offered.

The coordinated integration of this network is not an easy task, since each area needs to understand all the processes and players involved in other areas. Therefore, from the perspective of cooperation between state institutions, it is important to point out some of the people who are part of the system. In this integration of efforts, the implementation of UAB proposals depends on various players:

- State and municipal sponsors responsible for the implementation and maintenance of the center infrastructure.
- UAB coordinators at HEIs, appointed by the head of the institution to represent it at Capes in the entire process of academic and administrative management of the courses by UAB.
- Course coordinators and teachers responsible for delivering UAB courses.
- Teachers responsible for the content of educational materials for these courses supported by a multidisciplinary team at HEIs.
- Remote tutors located at HEIs, mediators of the teaching process under the guidance of teachers responsible for the disciplines (main technology media to provide remote tutoring is a toll-free telephone number and Internet interactivity through the teaching-learning platform).
- Center coordinators, responsible for academic and administrative management of the center.
- In-person tutors, learning process mediators, who help students in their day-to-day tasks at the centers, clarify any unclear points and encourage the creation of study groups.

The students themselves. Due to the nature of the teaching-learning process using the distance methodology students are pro-active players, who have a huge need to plan their work, and need to have the discipline to fulfil what is planned and thus incorporate autonomous attitudes into their daily practices, providing constructive criticism in relation to the system.

Therefore an effective articulation depends on harmonizing this complex and diversified system. Since we have described the activities in the organizational chart of the Distance Education Division, let us now see in more detail the UAB System in its two other fundamental forms: centers and HEIs.

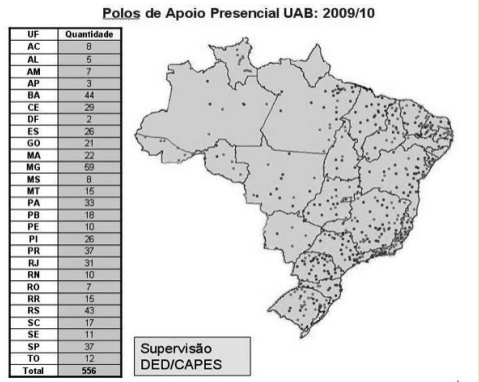
1.2. The Brazilian Open University System at the centers

Face-to-face support centers are physical structures for decentralized execution of some of the educational and administrative functions of the courses offered by the UAB System. The UAB System network of centers was created and maintained by the municipal and state governments and supported by MEC. Its infrastructure for students consists of a built area of 1,000 square meters, a laboratory of computers with access to broadband internet; an air-conditioned library with specialized collections, and areas for individual and group study; rooms for face-to-face tutoring; coordination and secretary offices; web conference facility; classrooms for face-to-face meetings and a lounge.

By and large, several institutions offer different courses at the same center simultaneously. This multi-institutional operation at each center requires planning the use of spaces such as computer labs, educational laboratories and face-to-face meeting rooms. Thus, the creation of a Council for the Centre was proposed in 2010, with the purpose of bringing together the interests of the sponsoring center, the center coordinator, coordinators of HEIs, students and other educational initiatives of the municipalities.

The center coordinator is a central figure in this area, since he is the professional responsible for the academic and administrative management of the center. In addition, there is a

Figure 1. **Brazilian Open University System face-to-face support centers distribution (2009/2010)**



UF	Quantidade
AC	8
AL	5
AM	7
AP	3
BA	44
CE	29
DF	2
ES	26
GO	21
MA	22
MG	59
MS	8
MT	15
PA	33
PB	18
PE	10
PI	26
PR	37
RJ	31
RN	10
RO	7
RR	15
RS	43
SC	17
SE	11
SP	37
TO	12
Total	556

Source: own research.

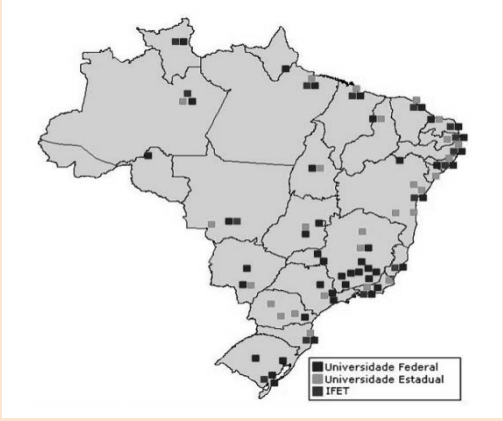
technical, administrative team and teaching staff –formed of at least a technician in information technology, a librarian, office assistants and in-person tutors–, who should form the human resources team of each center.

As a means of comparison, it should be noted that, while the center sponsor is responsible for the selection and remuneration of the technical team, in-person tutors (who work at the center) and remote tutors (who work at institutions) are selected by HEIs in a transparent public process where the academic merits should be evaluated in terms of two main elements: knowledge of teaching and learning processes involved in the methodology of distance education and proficiency in the content related to the area candidates applied for[15].

1.3. The Brazilian Open University System at the Higher Education Institutions

At the UAB system, it is up to the HEI to plan, implement and guarantee quality in the educational management of the distance courses offered. In 2010, 92 HEIs integrated the UAB System, namely 49 federal universities, 27 state universities and 16 federal institutes of technology[16]. These institutions were distributed quantitatively throughout the country as follows:

Figure 2. **Distribution of Higher Education Institutions Brazilian Open University System in Brazil**



Source: own research.

Educational projects are created for the courses to be implemented by HEIs in the distance education model. The parameters used to establish the level of quality desired for the educational projects of the courses offered by HEIs at the UAB System feature in an official document issued by SEED entitled Quality Reference Guides for Distance Courses, which provides guidance on DE evaluation and supervision processes for public and private institutions. Although they are not enforced by law, these reference guides help institutions with educational project proposals for distance courses and provide guidelines for expert committees that analyze these projects, taking into consideration accreditation and legal authorization required for teaching institutions to offer higher education distance courses.

Once approved internally, educational projects are submitted to the analysis of CGAAc, at the Distance Education Division (DED/CAPES). It works by means of ad-hoc consultation with the evaluation committees of the area forums, whose importance is described here. Once the educational projects are validated and the centers for offering a course are defined, HEIs submit their spreadsheets to CGFO, which provides the resources intended for course implementation and follow-up. The eligible expenses include the costs with production and free distribution of educational materials to students. Once these decisions are made, HEI opens a selection process for accepting students.

Overall, the implementation and management of a course in the distance education model involves two aspects –academic and operational–. The academic aspect is not exactly new to HEIs that are starting to offer distance courses, since the traditional courses offered meet the same basic require-

[15] The centre coordinator and tutors were awarded monthly grants from UAB/CAPES based on Laws nos. 11.273/2006 and 11.502/2007.

[16] To have an idea of the extension of the UAB System, we should have in mind that there were 97 public universities in the country, according to the Census of Higher Education of 2008. (http://www.inep.gov.br/download/censo/2008/resumo_tecnico_2008_15_12_09.pdf).

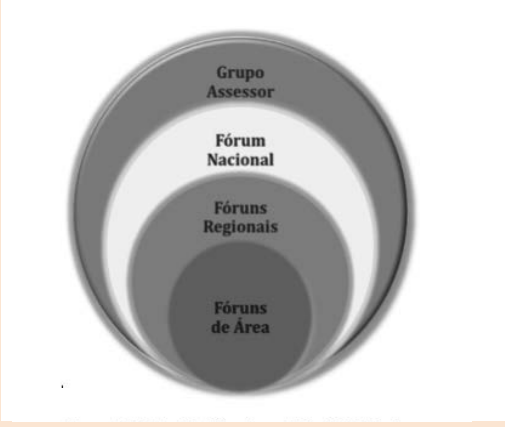
ments. However, the workload involved in distance education is a new element and represents a major challenge for a paradigm shift from the traditional face-to-face educational model to the distance education model.

To face this conundrum, UAB institutions developed distance education nuclei (centers or units). At these centers, a multidisciplinary team is organized to provide operational and logistics support for the operation of these courses such as support in the preparation of printed and virtual materials for the courses, including control and maintenance of a Virtual Learning Platform.

The multidisciplinary support team is composed of drawing instructors, illustrators, layout professionals, web designers, programmers, as well as teachers. These nuclei not only provide operational and logistics support that is essential for the courses, but also foster the spirit of technological innovation in education and bring new developments in information and knowledge to improve course quality.

In the scope of HEIs, it is also important to point out the role of the UAB coordinator, a teacher specifically appointed by the University President to represent the institution at Capes. The UAB coordinator works in the overall coordination of the course implementation process and is responsible for the management and accountability of financial resources. This is why coordinators formed the UAB National Forum of Coordinators, which represent a wider virtuous circle that monitors UAB's executive decisions. Given its importance between the years of 2005 to 2010, the segment below explains responsibilities and main decisions of this forum.

Figure 3. **Collegiate structure of the Brazilian Open University System**



Source: own research.

This variety of managerial environments was created to promote democratic management of higher education that would cover the various levels involved in a continuous building process that involved all stakeholders

Given their organization and activities, the forums represented a number of interests at all levels of the UAB System. Figure 3 shows the elements of this structure: Area Forums, Regional Forums, the National Forum and the Advisory Group, which are described below.

Area Forums were officially established through Administrative Act no. 78, dated April 14th, 2010, issued by The President of Capes. Designed to promote continuous administrative and educational appraisals of UAB courses, they acted as primary stages for discussion of UAB processes and had strategic importance. Here are some of the relevant themes that have already been discussed in these forums: drafting operational bylaws; creating instruments and guidelines for the evaluation of educational projects for UAB courses; setting out validation criteria for educational materials; educational models for laboratories (in particular, Physics, Chemistry, Biology and Mathematics); the structure of supervised internships; incentive strategies for sharing educational materials, etc.

A president and a vice-president, who were elected by their peers, led the works at these forums. Each of the 15 Area Fo-

rums (Languages, Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Biology, History, Geography, Philosophy, Sociology, Arts and Music, Education, Information Technology, Public Administration, Physical Education and Specializations) had three committees: editorial, evaluation, and management and follow-up. These committees met once a year and fostered a continuous debate on UAB's Virtual Work Environment.

On the other hand, the five Regional Forums consisted of centers' coordinators in the five regions of the country and UAB coordinators of the institutions that offered courses in their respective regions. The main focus of the debate at these forums was the centers' infrastructure and course performance. Like the National Forum, the Regional Forums were established by Administrative Act no. 79, published on April 14th, 2010. As previously mentioned, the National Forum was formed by UAB coordinators of the institutions with the purpose of assessing UAB's operations and direction.

The purpose of the Advisory Group, regulated by Administrative Act no. 75, dated April 14th, 2010, was to develop strategies for execution, evaluation and follow-up of all UAB's actions. Of a deliberative nature, the group included, as permanent members, the president of Capes, who presided over the Group; Capes' director of Distance Education; the secretary of Distance Education from MEC.

This variety of managerial environments was created to promote democratic management of higher education that would cover the various levels involved in a continuous building process that involved all stakeholders. This was evidenced by a work proposal for the system in 2011 that was presented at the III Forum of UAB Coordinators held on 17 and 18 November 2010:

> «The process of **DE institutionalization** is moving toward **convergence of teaching models**, by **dissemination of the use of ICTs and DE at HEIs** −without the creation of parallel instruments or areas− with the development of public policies directed at **tutor training** and **increased interaction between HEIs-Centers**» (Costa *apud* Duran, 2010, p. 63, our highlight).

(...) one of the major obstacles to the development of Latin American education is the lack of official data that could be used as a source for systematic studies conducted to outline the profile of good practices in this field

This proposal was developed by a significant number of UAB coordinators at the first meeting of coordinators for the National Program for Training in Public Administration and it led to the first drivers and recommendations that aimed at the stabilization and improvement of the system. By and large, it was concluded that the UAB System stabilization should be guided by the notion of complexity involved in the inclusion of new players, new tools, practices and words in the educational realm. Outcomes that had been evaluated until then included the optimization of educational management and incentive to the autonomous production of knowledge by students and mainly teachers.

1.4. Brazilian Open University System challenges and consequences

UAB is a complex system that faces challenges and consequences that spread to all areas. Among the challenges faced by the system's executive directors, the infrastructure of face-to-face centers is considered a key point. Furthermore, there are actions that involve the supply of books, laboratories and web conference systems (obtained via equipment bidding processes), as well the inclusion of UAB in the Broadband Program at Schools, which aims to provide internet to UAB face-to-face centers; concession of computers for each center via integration of UAB/ProInfo (National Program for Educational Technology); and funding for the purchase of vehicles for HEIs that are part of UAB with a view to facilitating the integration between HEIs and the centers. From 2007 to 2010, a total of U$65 million was invested in UAB face-to-face centers.

This investment is important not simply because face-to-face centers are the most recent space in the higher education structure in Brazil or that, according to orientation from minister Fernando Haddad, it should constitute the «house of the teacher» but rather because it may be seen as a future prototype of school architecture both for the inland centers, where it would represent an advanced science and technology campus, and for large cities, where shortage of space seems to hinder the implementation of a full time school.

To train tutors, DED/Capes invested in DE training projects at HEIs and in the communication of the possibilities in the use of information and communication technologies in teacher training in order to attract new supporters of the distance education model. We expect that teaching practices and DE management will be registered and shared in the future, including the dissemination of educational materials, produced under the UAB System. This will lead to a reflection on evaluation methods, forms of validation and recognition of scholarly research on this model, as well as incentive to sharing DE production.

It is worth reminding that, according to many communications from Mario Avendaño Arguedas, from the Instituto de Desarrollo Profesional Uladislao Gámez Solano (Ministry of Education of Costa Rica), one of the major obstacles to the development of Latin American education is the lack of official data that could be used as a source for systematic studies conducted to outline the profile of good practices in this field. However, since DE is a teaching model where written communication is predominant, whether in scholarly activities or operational relations, this problem seems to be coming to an end.

Among the consequences of the inclusion of the UAB System in Capes, with the creation of the DE and Face-to-Face Basic Education Divisions, we may say that there is a movement to establish equal conditions and benefits concerning the academic prestige and training for research and basic education purposes.

At the universities, teacher distance training is a subject that stirs controversy. Some prefer to see this as a viable way to serve teachers working at public schools in small Brazilian towns away from the larger cities. Others prefer to resist and criticize distance education as cheap and low quality. The latter are certainly not aware of the expenses announced by the State where it is clear that distance education is not cheap and that significant investments are required to guarantee staff and physical infrastructure, particularly at the inception of the process. Moreover, they do not think of the car traffic often found in large cities, the lack of space for traditional face-to-face courses or even the difficulties faced by public school teachers to move around in large cities, since they often live in the outskirts of those cities.

Therefore, living with the need for financial resources and incentives for innovation in education processes, we agree with the considerations made by Raúl Luna Lombardi[17], who points out:

> «To invest in education is expensive; however, failing to invest is much more expensive. That is why, somehow, studies assume that investment in ICTs does not result only in a personal benefit in competences and abilities of those studying and in a lower level of unemployment, but in a drive for the country, which benefits from it [as a whole]» (Lombardi apud Duran, 2010, p. 120).

Resistance to distance education is a reflection of some prejudices; however, we now have data about the relevance of this new education model. What we see from the complex UAB System at the HEIs, for example, is the expansion of the cognitive abilities of teachers who are committed to its implementation, though we still lack some systematic records of examples of success of DE and the difficulties it faces. Therefore, one of the challenges of the UAB System, besides DE institutionalization, is raising, analyzing and disseminating the entire large volume of information that DE has been producing over the years.

[17] Lombardi works for the Institute of Educational Technology, a body of the Spanish Ministry of Education responsible for the integration of ICTs in the non-university environment. He was a panelist in the International Conference «The Impact of ICT on Education» held by SEED/Unesco Brasil and Chile, in Brasília/2010, from where this quote was taken.

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