

# Educational Reproduction renewed: Intra-institutional Duality in the Open University of Brazil Program<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

In this article, we analyze the Universidade Aberta do Brasil (UAB [Open University of Brazil]) program, the aim of which is to democratize the Brazilian educational system, through the distance education modality and its institutionalization in the University of Brasilia (UnB). We question the democratizing intent of the program, based on contemporary theses that deal about the renewal of education reproduction dynamics and on the specialized literature already accumulated on the program in question. Precisely, we question whether the educational modality at issue becomes stratified, in a type of intra-institutional duality. For this, interviews were conducted with coordinators of undergraduate distance programs, seeking to analyze the several dimensions of the supposed intra-institutional duality generated by the program. A documental analysis was also conducted, aimed at complementing the understanding of the subject and reaching the goal of the research. A complex institutional scenario was found, with significant changes over the years of application of the program. However, it became clear that institutional and teaching operations, and community relations in distance programs, in several aspects, are marginal to face-to-face programs. After an analysis of the research results, it was concluded that the distance modality is confined to merely partial institutionalization and inclusion, reinforcing the thesis of the theory of reproduction in its most current version.

## Keywords

Educational reproduction – Inequality – Distance higher education – Open University of Brazil.

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## Introduction

Higher education in Brazil and worldwide has undergone profound processes of transformation in recent decades. This level of education has reached the masses and become diversified, and its cultural, economic and political relevance is stressed throughout the globe. However, it is still strongly impacted by social and demographic inequalities in general, as shown in a wide and diverse literature on the subject. As Prates and Collares (2014, p. 57) say: “there is no linear relationship between expanding access and reducing inequality in the [higher education] system”, or Silva (2003, 105), for whom one of the most noticed paradoxes today is the expansion of educational systems in modern societies and their resistance to increasing equity.

In this scenario, the democratization of higher education training appears as a goal in a wide variety of discourses and strategies of political and civil agents: the search for greater equality and equity in conditions of access, permanence and quality, characterizes, to a large extent, the rationale of proposals and policies for the restructuring of this sector of the education system. This contemporary effort seeks to break away from the reproductive bonds between the inequality of the social world and the educational universe, which characterize the modern educational system in its historic function of conserving diverse social hierarchical and prestige positions; a function concealed, mainly, by the meritocratic discourse (BOURDIEU; PASSERON, 2009).

Concomitantly, the advent and proliferation of New Information and Communication Technologies (NICTs) has reinforced this ideology and political agenda. The use of the virtual environment for educational practices performs, among other functions, that of a powerful tool to reduce space-time and resource barriers, collaborating towards democratization of this level of the system. Localities, people and social groups historically excluded or under-represented in face-to-face institutions could, from this paradigm shift, be more easily included.

Especially in Brazil, after a long and discontinuous history, and in a still very marginal position in the system, Distance Learning (EaD), now through online virtual environments, is growing rapidly as a modality and methodology of teaching and learning. In higher education, it is one of the factors responsible for maintaining the expansion of enrollments in recent years, and it also has democratizing aims. A careful look at this modality would clarify the current framework of higher education in the country and its trends and realities in respect to overcoming reproduction.

UAB is a public policy, articulated with a set of educational policies that have been changing higher education. In practice, this policy forms a system which, since 2006, among other functions, articulates federal, state and municipal levels in offering distance higher education, through an agreement with Higher Education Public Institutions (IPES - Instituições Públicas de Ensino Superior [Higher Education Public Institutions]). Unlike other open university models worldwide, such as the pioneering Open University (UK), an institution specializing in EaD, UAB acts under the acronym and status of IPES, stimulating bimodality in IPES. UAB is not an institution, but a system that internalizes IPES programs across the country, to reach “tiers of the population that have difficulties

accessing university education” (CAPES, 2015). It works through face-to-face support centers and virtual platforms, articulating different federative and political levels, and focuses on undergraduate teaching degrees. Its general coordination has been performed by the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior (CAPES [Coordination for Improvement of Higher Education Personnel]), of the Ministry of Education.

Using the image by Filarte (2003 apud GRIPP; BARBOSA, 2014, p. 41), UAB chooses an IPES to become a “mother university” that branches, physically and virtually, among antennas that reach previously underserved regions and groups.

This program brings, in addition to differences in level and modality, a greatly diversified institutional model, parts of which go beyond and are independent from the IPES, demanding cooperation among several political-administrative levels. Would this complex configuration enable its intended democratization of public higher education? That is, would it make IPES accessible to social sectors previously excluded from them? Or would institutional and educational diversification generate an intra-institutional duality with a gap between distance and face-to-face education? Ultimately, would we be facing reproduction by other means, more subtle than the mere exclusion of social sectors from the system?

These questions about the extent to which and how the complexity of the educational system and the diversification of its public breach, or not, the reproductive aspect of education, are found in the contemporary literature of the sociology of education, which aims to consolidate and refine an axis that structures the field – the theory of social reproduction (VILELA; COLLARES, 2009). For that theory, “precocious and brutal” exclusion and segregation give way to new and complex mechanisms of reproduction that are internal to the system, more subtle, “mild” (BOURDIEU, 2010, p.219 - 222). Hence, oxymorons have appeared, such as the classic: “exclusion of the interior”, in Bourdieu’s terms.

Thus, apparently democratic transformations in the contemporary educational system might come to conserve and maintain social inequalities and hierarchies. For Bourdieu (2010), this updating makes it so the educational system, expanded and:

[...] however, strictly reserved to a few, manages the feat of combining the appearances of “democratization” with the reality of a reproduction that takes place at a higher degree of dissimulation – and therefore, has an accentuated effect of social legitimation (BOURDIEU, 2010, p. 223).

That is, it is founded on the banner of deceit and simulacrum. Derouet (2002, 2004), in the same vein, remarks that the privileged classes, in the face of the complexity of the scenario, articulate a “new distinction corresponding to their position” (DEROUET, 2004, p. 139), continuing, by other means (selection of establishments and professions, for example), socio educational reproduction. Also for Dubet (2001, p. 8-9), “equality has increased because education is no longer a rare good, rather it benefits all, but it became a much more hierarchical good when barriers were replaced by levels”, and, with that, superior classes and social sectors continued holding the monopoly of the best and most profitable fields of training.

Prates (2007), following the theory of inequality developed by Samuel Lucas and other empirical-quantitative researches (PRATES; COLLARES, 2014, p. 66-67), has demonstrated that the institutional differentiation of higher education systems in the world that has made possible their expansion, has turned the higher education each time more founded on institutional-functional stratification. With that, unequal socio educational job role would continue to be reproduced, despite a general increase in schooling:

[...] the internal differentiation [of the system] is exclusive, because lower quality institutions attract the working classes and students from minority groups, leading them to occupy inferior job role in the work market” (PRATES; COLLARES, 2014, p. 69).

The model and administrative-institutional category (university or technological institute; public or private) is fundamental to define not only the quality of the agents' training, but also the weight and social prestige of their credentials and of the very condition of being a student. It is also known that there is stratification among programs and intended professions in the same institution (SETTON, 1999).

For Vitale (2010, p. 52), EAD is one of the main forms of institutional differentiation of higher education in the current scenario and a trend among traditional universities, in order to expand and seek a more equal distribution of traits among their public (VITALE, 2007, p. 46). Therefore, it is possible and necessary to bring to this discussion of the sociology of education the modality variable (distance education). In this vein, we ask a more substantiated question: when faced with the same programs, in the same institution; however, in different educational modalities-methodologies, EAD and face-to-face, as we see them in the current UAB model – would we verify this stratification? In that case, might we deal about intra-institutional stratification – here, dual – via institutional modality? One might remember the warning by Bourdieu (2010, p.224), when analyzing the contemporary educational system, “the identity of words hides the diversity of things?” Why, could the same be said about the UAB system, under the banner of an IPES? In the sense of an inclusion that covers an exclusion (KUENZER, 2007), or of the creation of excluded ones within, in Bourdieu's sense?

## **Methodological procedures**

Our field of study was the University of Brasilia (UnB), one of the IPES belonging to the UAB system. To enquire into the institutionalization of the distance modality via this system, the research at hand uses qualitative data production and analysis techniques: bibliographical and documental analysis and interviews. However, the main means of data production and focus of the analysis will be unprecedented, semi-structured interviews with coordinators of the distance undergraduate program. The position of coordinator is key in the articulation of the program's several levels, and, currently, is one of main actors in its institutionalization.

It was specifically chosen for research, for several reasons: 1 - it has not been much explored in previous research, as opposed to higher positions at UnB or the

Ministry of Education; 2 - The program coordinator, most times, has been or still is a professor in the UAB system, so, in addition to managerial experience, he or she has teaching experience and more contact with students; 3 - it is a position that articulates several levels of the program: the face-to-face municipal center, the institution, and the general UAB coordination, and is in the center of a network of actors and processes; 4 - the coordinator represents, today, a key role in institutionalizing UnB's program, due to the decentralization of management to the academic units; 5 - and last, the coordinator can bring more practical and informal knowledge, thus complementing data from official management documents which, in a way, already synthesize the action and vision of the group formed by the program's general coordination and the university's higher administration positions.

We used the criteria of availability and a minimum of one semester in the position to conduct the interviews with coordinators. From a target population of 8 persons, general coordinators of the UnB-UAB undergraduate programs functioning at the time, 6 persons were interviewed – Pedro, Miguel, Bruno, Bernardo, Felipe and Antônio (fictitious names). In one of the interviews, the interviewee, Miguel, preferred to include a pedagogical coordinator, Jorge, as a participant, since he had been much longer at the coordination of the program. Hence, one of the interviews was a group interview. In total, there were 7 interviewees, from 6 programs/coordinating bodies. Only one of them is not currently in the position of coordinator, but was in the previous coordination, for four consecutive years.

The position of researcher will be active in data production and analysis, whether explicitly, from the theoretical axioms listed and constructed above, whether from the hypotheses based on them and on the researcher's experience and view of the object at hand. We agree, finally, with Haguette (2010, p. 77) when she says that, in an interview:

[...] we must recognize that we are receiving only a picture the informant has of his world, and it is up to us, researchers, to assess the degree of correspondence between his or her statements and 'objective reality', or factual reality . [...]. A key point in the quality control of the data, in every case, is in the systematic use of data from other sources related to the fact observed, in order to analyze the consistency of the information and its validity.

On the other hand, control of the symbolic game, through a reflex reflexivity, by the interviewer, was also used as an effort in the search, at the time of the interview, for "active and methodical listening" (BOURDIEU, 2007, p. 695) that overcomes the biasing effects of the relationship, underpinned by the basis given by the theory that guides the interviewer.

## **A brief history of EAD at UnB**

EAD at UnB is a reality today, whether in extension or *latu sensu* postgraduate programs, especially through centers such as CEAD (Centro de Educação a Distância [Distance Education Center]), in semi-face-to-face practices, with the Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment (Moodle) open source software, in face-to-face programs, or through the offer of undergraduate programs centered on the UAB system.

UnB is a milestone in the history of EAD in the country. And the history of EAD has already been largely documented and studied by authors such as Martins (2006) and Gomes and Fernandes (2014). Since the 1970's, at several times, UnB has made original efforts in this modality and has been a center of nationally relevant specialists and experiences. The first EaD experiences were conducted still under the dictatorial regime, when UnB signed an agreement with the United Kingdom's Open University, to undertake extension activities. This included translating printed material from said university, in which the university publishing trust played a major role.

After re-democratization, in 1985, the focus on the agreement with Open University did not continue, as it was excessively identified with the regime (MARTINS, 2006). An open and almost informal form of education, less connected to the regime's line, took its place, using printed material. CEAD (formerly Centro de Educação Aberta, Continuada, a Distância [Center for Open, Continued, Distance Education]) appeared in this period and, together with the School of Education (FE), and after the UNESCO chair, became one of the pillar bodies of EaD at UnB. That body, created in 1989, during Cristovam Buarque's administration, was under the Deanery of Extension. For its pioneering character, it is still a prominent national body; and today it uses the Moodle platform as a virtual learning environment, in addition to other medias.

In the 1990's, UNB began suffering exogenous pressure to offer courses to state-owned enterprises and participate in specific agreements and public notices (GOMES, FERNANDES, 2014). This was the decade of agreements and more concrete efforts to include distance education in the national system of higher education.

From then on, EaD began being institutionalized and fostered nationally, and UnB, to this day, it still restructuring internally. In 2001, the institution launched a directive of the Undergraduate Chamber to create and offer distance undergraduate courses. In 2004, Moodle was implemented at UnB, which, today, serves not only distance undergraduate programs, but, broadly, face-to-face programs, in thousands of courses - and is one of the points at which these two modalities most meet.

Even before UAB, EaD at UnB already had a consolidated history of training teachers for basic education, also following characteristics of this modality nationally. Moura and Imbrosi (2012, p. 28-29) recall an agreement with the Secretariat of Education of the Federal District, in 2001. Between 2005 and 2006, national programs, such as Pró-Licenciatura and UAB itself, fostered a new and more advanced phase of the modality at UnB.

Lastly, we anchor ourselves on the critical synthesis at the conclusion of the work by Martins (2006, p. 157), whose research ended exactly at the beginning of the implementation of UAB at UnB.

The facts regarding EaD, raised in this research, taking place between 1979 and 2006, at UnB, show the absence of an institutional policy for this modality of teaching. In these 27 years, the university, as a whole, did not discuss a policy of the university for this modality of teaching. The historical dimension presented demonstrated that many of the efforts expended by different institutional actors resulted in a low degree of appropriation of those experiences by the institution. Efforts remained circumscribed to the actors directly connected to EAD. Hence, the

techniques and knowledge developed in the programs conducted were not passed on to other organs of the university. [...] Therefore [...] initiatives became fragmented and were conducted in closed spaces, without interlocution with the University's academic community.

Hence, the same author defends partial institutionalization by 2006:

We defend the idea of partial institutionalization, as we identify, in the history of EaD at UnB, sometimes conflicts of interest among the university's units, sometimes consensuses built on the sharing of common meanings. This bipolar behavior has prevented the full institutionalization of EaD, in the university as a whole. In the case of full institutionalization, UnB may adopt EaD as an alternative for its expansion projects of undergraduate and postgraduate programs (MARTINS, 2006, p. 123).

Despite being in the vanguard, the institution, per research by Martins (2006), considers this modality a second route. Gomes and Fernandes (2014, p. 89) comment that one cause of this is, supposedly, that EaD:

[...] began as a timid process of institutionalization, through university extension, an arm considered to be the shortest in the tripod of Brazilian higher education, in which the research dimension is more valued than that of teaching.

The isolation of EaD noted by Martins (2006) denotes the lack of synergy between this modality and the institution, a great dependence on willful agents, as well as the absence of an internal consensus.

## **UAB at UnB: management, teaching-pedagogical and communitary dimensions**

Thus, UAB at UnB is, simultaneously, a point of breach and continuity of this process, as it replaces/articulates processes already in action, and brings new quality, given the magnitude of the program. UAB has brought, effectively, despite other experiences, such as Pró-Licenciatura, the distance modality to undergraduate programs, the “base of the university”, according to one of the interviewees of Gomes and Fernandes (2014, p. 90). As stated in very management folder of UnB/DEGD (Diretoria de Ensino de Graduação à Distância [Board of Undergraduate Distance Teaching]) (2014), UAB has contributed to the construction of the EaD institutional policy at UnB. Also, UnB's Institutional Political-Pedagogical Project (Projeto Político Pedagógico Institucional - PPPI) (2011, p. 22) states:

In these last years, there has been an enormous increase in Distance Education activities at UnB. [...] the Universidade Aberta do Brasil (UAB), coming from a national policy managed by CAPES, has consolidated the EAD process at the University of Brasilia, from 2007, and attempted to overcome obstacles to the institutionalization of physical and temporal distance, through a large variety of interactivity instruments and resources.

However, this understanding of an advancement, that includes at distance education in the institutional planning, still has significant conflicts at this time, and its advances face serious risks. Pedro, one of the interviewees in our research, spoke of some of the program's actions as "hanging by a thread", considering that many of them take place without the necessary resources and infrastructure – hence, through voluntarism of the modality's agents.

From the advent of DEGD, in 2009, the program's management has been undergoing a process of decentralization, which means a more active role of academic units and their respective collegiate administrative bodies. This decentralization is already a reality, per the interviews. All interviewees stated they had chairs in collegiate administrative bodies, and even in other deliberative spaces, in schools and colleges of the university. Representativity in higher councils takes place through representatives of the academic units themselves, or directly, through DEGD.

This policy is, in general, viewed positively, but interviewees raised several limitations and negative aspects of this decentralization. The elements of the conditions of employment relationships were what most drew our attention – all interviewees had complaints in that respect, especially when it came to the secretariat and tutorial staffs. Felipe says this is a "very strong" problem, the "Achilles heel" – this precariousness, high turnover and instability of the work of these civil servants who have not been selected through public service exams, including technical-administrative workers and tutors. As to tutors, Bernardo says "they are in a very bad situation, a critical situation, I would say".

The precarious and temporary condition of tutors was also a very problematic point brought up in the research by Martins and Amaral (2011), Almeida (2014) and Novais and Fernandes (2011, p. 189). The program and its institutionalization are negatively affected by this employment mode based on stipends. This scenario is, once again, similar to the one noted in the research by Losego (apud GRIPP; BARBOSA, 2014, p. 41), about the decentralization of universities. He calls "invisible work" the involvement of faculty with other centers, which have few permanent employees for the same missions as those of the mother university.

As to the teaching-pedagogical level, most coordinators glimpse or experience some type of hybridization of the two modalities. Currently, the Projetos Político-Pedagógicos (PPP [Political Pedagogical Projects]) and the flows of programs between the two modalities have converged or are moving towards convergence. This effort has been important for overcoming duality, as stated by Miguel: "our goal for this year (2015) is to draw EaD closer to the face-to-face modality. They are now two different things. It looks like one thing here and another one there". In the same interview, Jorge spoke of the prospect of developing a bachelor's program and, in the future, a distance postgraduate program – which, before, was unthinkable, but now is "closer" – as students are already asking questions about that and "in their final papers, they develop very good projects".

But this is not a constancy. At Antonio's academic unit, the Undergraduate Sectoral Chamber has denied the equivalency of the same subjects in different modalities, and this duality is symbolic: two equal subjects, in two modalities, cannot be equivalent.

Centers and student profiles are very diverse. Normally, agents contrast two discrepant realities. Felipe speaks of a good result at the Ipatinga center, in Minas Gerais State: good grades, study groups, and academic training prospects. Conversely, at the centers in Acre State, there was an evasion of almost 70% after the last student admission: “we already have a view that they were not prepared for EaD”. The same agent speaks of a “qualitative difference” between the modalities’ profiles: “there is a qualitative difference in quality, we can’t deny it. Students who enter through the entrance exam at the face-to-face university have a very high qualitative level [...], and our EaD students do not have the same profile as face-to-face students. [...] They have had a different basic education”. Also, he points to the characteristics already found in the national literature on EaD: it refers to older students, in the work market, and who have families: “most of our students who leave the program, when they ask for reintegration, [we find that], they had left because of domestic problems”.

In the community dimension, and its characteristic dynamics of recognition, we find advanced situations and even realities like that of Felipe’s program, where there is, in a collegiate administrative body, a group among the faculty that is “clearly against” the distance modality. Or even where the [face-to-face program] students do not even know that the [distance] program exists”. Between these extremes, we find varied perspectives of resistance-adherence, which have clearly changed over time, mainly through the persistence of agents who support the project. Bruno speaks of resistances, on one the hand, along with an almost political and ideological adherence by other professors, who even reject the stipend.

Using the image by Zabalza (2004, p. 69), we find, in this context, a mutual fostering of “filiations” and “phobias”: solidarity networks of the UAB group and opposition networks of those who do not support the program. Among this “filiation” of supporters, we can list the permanent tutors and the students, who together try to construct their identities through this modality, or through UAB as an entity, defending themselves from the emerging dualism.

As to the students’ feeling of belonging to UnB, its limitations are pointed out unanimously. Miguel said that “EaD students, because of the very way the program is formulated, [...] are, let us say, segregated students”.

In reference to an extension program involving face-to-face interaction, Pedro says that, “as to their (the students’) feeling of belonging, we notice, for example, how an [extension] project changes this reality completely.” Meanwhile, Felipe comments that the students’ coming to the campus is a “social event, it has a very special significance for them”; “they really feel the absence of this contact [...] we feel they very much want something that is face-to-face.” Antônio, in the same vein, says the students are “dazzled” when they “step into the institution, feel the institution”.

Dreyfuss (2009) has been one of the authors to defend the importance of face-to-face contact in education dynamics. Here we see a “thirst for face-to-face contact”, of the students who, at some level, feel or desire to feel they belong to UnB. It seems clear that the program, despite face-to-face meetings at the centers, established by the law, disregards this dimension, which seems essential to us, from the interviews. Such students, per the interviews, do not undergo a complete process of rituals to join the university community.

## Conclusion

The central goal of this study was to answer whether, between the distance modality (UAB) and the face-to-face modality, at UnB's undergraduate level, there was any intra-institutional stratification/hierarchization; in this case, dual. With this, we believed we were analyzing a concrete form of continuity of the complex contemporary educational reproduction in our conjuncture, which, as pointed out by the theoretical debate, through authors such as Bourdieu (2010), Dubet (2001), Prates (2007, 2010) and so many others, has more subtle and paradoxical formats, such as an excluding inclusion (KUENZER, 2007). The originality of the study resides, in our opinion, in addressing the educational modality variable within the classic problematics of reproduction through education.

Through the analysis of interviews, we see there has been an important advancement in institutionalization, involving all dimensions analyzed, from the beginning of UnB's participation in the UAB system. We list below some examples of such advancements: the maintenance of a certain stability up to 2015; the explicit acknowledgement of EaD in the documents of the higher administration, as well as continuous strategies of development and improvement; the consolidation of DEGD; a greater participation of academic units and the acknowledgement of the distance coordination; a few convergences at the teaching-pedagogical level and in academic administration, such as the PPPs; and the permanence of willful agents, champions of the modality and program.

On the other hand, it also became clear that institutionalization, in general, finds both external barriers, from the legal-regulatory level, and from the program's format itself, in addition to the absence of diverse resources; as well as barriers from internal levels, due to the resistance of agents and structures to recognizing and incorporating the program and modality, as a university. The agents' employment relationship and condition, especially that of technical-administrative workers and tutors, the internal infrastructure and that of the centers, are also precarious. The curriculum and the training of distance students are clearly more limited and rigid, and do not include, in a satisfactory manner, extension, research, and community life, causing the dynamics of identification and recognition between agents of the program and the university to be extremely fragile and occur on a case-by-case basis.

Thus, in addition to partial institutionalization, we can also, in line with Heringer and Honorato (2014, p. 316), speak of a partial inclusion of the EAD student, as a member of the IPES, as an institution and community, or as what Coulon (2008, p. 42) calls a "native member", in the teaching and community sense. Despite benefits in terms of costs, the program suffers losses from the lack of face-to-face contact and the other provisions that come with it. UAB, under UnB, based on our results, fails to construct a university citizenship or, at least, constitutes a very peculiar citizenship, distant from face-to-face academic life. In the same vein, although UAB officially offers, in this case, a diploma from a public university belonging to the program, the configuration around the program excludes it from a range of resources which, initially, should be triggered.

The institutional operations, teaching and community relations of the UAB system programs, at UnB, in several aspects, are far from, or, in the words of Lopes de Souza,

Aires and Lopes (2012, p. 290), “parallel” to academic units and the face-to-face modality, thus founding a visible duality. More than that: an uneven, hierarchized duality, in which distance learning is the underprivileged side. Hence, it becomes possible to state, from the interviews and their wider analysis, that the program proved to be neither egalitarian, given institutional disparities among the modalities, nor equitable, as it does not give greater institutional support to those who most need it, the targets of the inclusion policy that is UAB. This, to close the paradox, even if its image is linked to democratization.

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