

ARTICLE

## INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF PUBLIC DISTANCE EDUCATION AS ESSENTIALLY DIALECTIC PHENOMENON<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** The purpose of this article is to examine the relations of cause and effect in the process of organic incorporation of distance education in public universities. Therefore, it is proposed the concept of dialectics to explain the institutionalization of the modality. With regard to the methodology, from the methodological triangulation different instruments, strategies and sources of data were used, namely: documentary analysis; virtual focus groups; semi-structured interviews; Delphi technique; and virtual questionnaire. The data were analyzed using qualitative and quantitative approaches, without losing sight of our epistemological matrix concerning Max Weber's comprehensive sociology, which concerns the apprehension of universities as clusters of subjects who attribute a subjective sense to their socially oriented action. With the study, it was understood that the institutionalization of distance education is an essentially dialectical phenomenon, because it is enmeshed in constant institutional conflicts driven by immanent contradictions. While dichotomous views persist, especially through the model established by the Open University System of Brazil (UAB – *Sistema Universidade Aberta do Brasil*), there are important obstacles in the organic incorporation of the modality. Therefore, it is considered that the overcoming of this public policy of an emergency nature tends to culminate in the greater synthesis process, in which distance education and classroom education become juxtaposed. Hybrid education is achieved, since the qualifications “face-to-face” and “distance” become secondary, giving greater focus to the educational process.

**Keywords:** distance education, institutionalization, UAB System, dialectic.

## INSTITUCIONALIZAÇÃO DA EDUCAÇÃO A DISTÂNCIA PÚBLICA ENQUANTO FENÔMENO ESSENCIALMENTE DIALÉTICO

**RESUMO:** O objetivo deste artigo é examinar as relações de causa e efeito no processo de incorporação orgânica da Educação a Distância (EaD) nas universidades públicas. Para tanto, propomos o conceito de dialética para explicar a institucionalização da modalidade. No que se refere à metodologia, a partir da triangulação metodológica utilizamos diferentes instrumentos, estratégias e fontes de coleta, a saber:

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análise documental; grupos focais virtuais; entrevistas semiestruturadas; técnica Delphi; e questionário virtual. Os dados foram analisados mediante as abordagens qualitativa e quantitativa, sem perder de vista a nossa matriz epistemológica concernente à sociologia compreensiva de Max Weber. Esta diz respeito à apreensão das universidades enquanto aglomerados de sujeitos que atribuem sentido subjetivo à sua ação socialmente orientada. Com o estudo, chegamos ao entendimento de que a institucionalização da EaD é um fenômeno essencialmente dialético, porque está enredado em constantes embates movidos pelas contradições imanentes. Enquanto persistem as visões dicotômicas, sobretudo por meio do modelo instituído pelo Sistema Universidade Aberta do Brasil (UAB), tem-se importantes percalços na incorporação orgânica da modalidade. Assim sendo, consideramos que a superação dessa política pública de caráter emergencial tende a culminar no processo maior de síntese, em que EaD e educação presencial se tornam justapostas. Chega-se à educação híbrida, uma vez que os qualificativos “presencial” e “a distância” se tornam secundários, dando-se maior enfoque ao processo educacional.

**Palavras-chave:** educação a distância, institucionalização, Sistema UAB, dialética.

### **INSTITUCIONALIZACIÓN DE LA EDUCACIÓN A DISTANCIA PÚBLICA COMO FENÓMENO ESENCIALMENTE DIALÉCTICO**

**RESÚMEN:** El propósito de este artículo es examinar las relaciones de causa y efecto en el proceso de incorporación orgánica de la educación a distancia en las universidades públicas. Para eso, proponemos el concepto de dialéctica para explicar la institucionalización de la modalidad. En cuanto a la metodología, a partir de la triangulación metodológica utilizamos diferentes instrumentos, estrategias y fuentes de recolección, a saber: análisis documental; grupos focales virtuales; entrevistas semi-estructuradas; Técnica Delphi; y cuestionario virtual. Los datos fueron analizados utilizando enfoques cualitativos y cuantitativos, sin perder de vista nuestra matriz epistemológica sobre la sociología comprensiva de Max Weber. Se trata de la aprehensión de las universidades como agrupaciones de sujetos que atribuyen un sentido subjetivo a su acción socialmente orientada. Con el estudio llegamos a entender que la institucionalización de la educación a distancia es un fenómeno esencialmente dialéctico, porque está inmerso en constantes choques institucionales impulsados por contradicciones inmanentes. Si bien persisten las visiones dicotómicas, especialmente a través del modelo establecido por el Sistema de la Universidad Abierta de Brasil (UAB), existen importantes obstáculos en la incorporación orgánica de la modalidad. Por tanto, consideramos que la superación de esta política pública de carácter urgente tiende a culminar en el mayor proceso de síntesis, en el que se yuxtaponen la educación a distancia y la educación presencial. Se logra la educación híbrida, ya que las titulaciones “presenciales” y “a distancia” pasan a ser secundarias, dando mayor enfoque al proceso educativo.

**Palabras clave:** educación a distancia, institucionalización, Sistema UAB, dialéctica.

## INTRODUCTION

If Distance Education (DE) was constantly expanding in recent decades, the pandemic caused by the new coronavirus certainly intensified this process. Due to the necessary measures of social distancing and isolation, many institutions have resorted to emergency remote teaching<sup>4</sup> and, consequently, to the use of different digital technologies as a way to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic scenario in the educational scope. Distance education, considering its specificities of separation in time and/or space, came to be seen as an alternative or, in several experiences, a necessity to adapt to the new configurations of the teaching-learning process. Those courses that were already carried out through this modality generally had less significant changes, adapting better to the pandemic period. On the other hand, all face-to-face courses were adapted, causing institutions to expand the use of DE tools.

Given these considerations, the main objective of this article is to examine causal relationships in the process of organic incorporation of distance education in public universities. For that, we start from data collected with professionals who work or have worked in the scope of the Open University System of Brazil (UAB, *Sistema Universidade Aberta do Brasil*). As an epistemological matrix, we have the comprehensive Weberian sociology. The goal is to understand institutionalization under a recursive character, in which the attribution of subjective meaning to social action is constituted as a founding characteristic. Furthermore, we understand this incorporation of modality as an essentially dialectical phenomenon, driven by immanent contradictions.

The structure of the text begins with a general presentation that contextualizes the concept of institutionalization from which we start. Then, we briefly present the methodology and methodological procedures of the research. After that, there is a discussion based on the data collected, on the fundamental characteristics of the institutionalization of DE, on the typical contradictions and the consequent internal debates. Subsequently, we follow with the definition of dialectic, together with a causal explanation for the phenomenon investigated. Finally, we present some considerations to complete the text and place our study in the midst of discussions in the area.

## WHY AND HOW TO ANALYZE THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

The institutionalization of DE is an essential condition for the continuity of the modality. Generally, the Brazilian experience with this modality is part of a bureaucratic apparatus that, historically, is accommodated to the regular offer of face-to-face education only. As we see in Mill and Veloso (2021), the insertion of distance education represents innovation and generates estrangement or even destabilization of a culturally incorporated order. Many institutions, with all their resources, organization and structure traditionally adequate and directed to face-to-face education, are faced with an effervescence when the incorporation of distance courses that, in different measures, subvert the institutional order, effervescence that, related to perception of the subjects, it generates many resistances. Due to lack of knowledge or even the dispute for resources, those more engaged with face-to-face education tend to be prejudiced against distance education, rejecting it or, in different ways, resisting it. That is why, after the initial period of estrangement and with the consequent dissemination of the practice and culture associated with the modality, naturalization is sought as a way to cool down resistance and then ensure its assimilation.

In the case of public universities, discussions about institutionalizing distance education take on other contours that, in many ways, are more complex. In recent years, the UAB System has been the main public policy for distance higher education in the country (FERREIRA; CARNEIRO, 2015). Responsible for exerting coercive pressure on the configuration of distance education, the UAB System ends up standardizing actions in the modality, through funding related to specific public notices. With

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<sup>4</sup> The text does not deepen the understanding of this term since it is not the focus of the analysis. However, for us, the use of “remote teaching” instead of distance education has legal implications, and a relationship with the contradictions generated by the UAB. We will discuss this in another study and in the first author's doctoral thesis.

the role of stimulating the offer of distance courses, this policy certainly brought significant changes at the heart of universities, such as the hiring of professors, structuring of managing bodies, incentive to research, investment in infrastructure, induction of offers, among others. However, even today, it is discussed to what extent the fundamental experiences in the institutions germinated and how this has led to the organic incorporation of distance education. After almost 15 years, does the modality still depend to a large extent on the UAB System to continue to exist in universities?

Certainly, the pandemic intensified this debate, especially because, with the social distancing and isolation measures, institutions had to adapt to emergency remote teaching. Now, how did the presence of distance education and all its cultural apparatus contribute to mitigating the impacts of the pandemic scenario? The answer to this question is extremely intricate and demands investigations focused on the reality of universities. Anyway, the discussion about the need to effectively institutionalize distance education was brought up, in addition to pointing out the mishaps that persist in this process. If the modality were organically incorporated into institutions, permeating the organizational culture, it is certain that the needs to adapt to social distancing and isolation would have been faced in different ways. As Nascimento and Vieira (2016) emphasize, institutionalizing distance education is currently important, because it would enable decision-making regarding the inclusion of this modality as an institutional alternative for teaching and learning, among other things.

Thus, in this text, we seek to review the understanding of the phenomenon to identify its functioning and the specificities that shape it. Our focus is on public universities (state and federal) from all regions of the country that work within the UAB System. We start from the understanding that institutionalizing distance education represents crystallizing procedures and practices, guaranteeing its ability to reproduce and, consequently, its legitimacy. Strictly speaking, it is a continuum, composed of levels or gradations that are constituted and allow the evaluation of degrees of development of the process that does not occur in a binary way (FERREIRA; CARNEIRO, 2015). Therefore, the incorporation of the modality is considered to overcome the qualifiers “face-to-face” and “distance” (FERREIRA; MILL, 2014). By institutionalizing, we also understand the ability to reproduce, so that, for that, legitimacy must be guaranteed. Therefore, the interpretation that the people make and, consequently, the focus on social action become essential elements to understand recursion (MACHADO-DA-SILVA; FONSECA; CRUBELLATE, 2005).

To understand the dynamics and organizational culture that affect subjectivity and allow the reproduction of institutional practices – as in the case of distance education –, we resort to comprehensive sociology. The focus on the subjective meaning attributed to social action is the mainstay of our analytical enterprise. We emphasize that this article is a part of a doctoral research that has Weberian sociology as its epistemological matrix. Therefore, this analytical perspective shapes the entire structuring of the methodological procedures, and the way of approaching the data. For Weber (2016), the understanding of human behavior obtained through interpretation generates qualitatively specific evidence, considered *sui generis*. According to Colliot-Thélène (2016), action can be considered social when there is a relationship to another. However, its heuristic capacity is associated with the researcher's understanding, through the interpretation of the subjective meaning attributed by the agents. This means that Weberian postulates bring to the discussion the understanding of social structures from the collective practices that constitute them. Organizations, including universities, come to be understood as “developments and intertwining of specific actions of individual people, since only these can be subjects of an action that is oriented in a direction” (WEBER, 2016, p. 623).

In other words, the Weberian perspective that underlies our analysis concerns the understanding that the object of study is profiled, ultimately, by the intertwining of actions between the subjects. Weber (2016) understands that socially oriented and meaningful action concerns the expectations that result not only from the actions of other individuals, but also from a rationally elaborated statute, in the case of so-called associations. Regarding the universities, the behaviors that guide institutional practices are guided: on the one hand, by the reciprocal expectation generated by social action, whether based on consensus or guided by dissent. On the other hand, by bureaucracy and, more precisely, by the rationally elaborated statute that engenders institutional expectations responsible for influencing action. Thus, our Weberian approach starts from the premise that institutions have an organizational culture and a bureaucratic apparatus that exert a certain coercive pressure to ensure the

probability of an action attentive to institutional expectations. However, the conduct of the act depends on the interpretation made by the subjects. It is in this sense that resistance, prejudice, the ethos that permeates universities, etc. are at the heart of the process that we will detail later.

With these considerations, we move on to our theoretical effort, based on empirical evidence, to start from a notion that is already settled on the institutionalization of distance education and through this, move towards a causal explanation of the phenomenon that has the dialectic as a conceptual instrument. Since the organic incorporation of the modality involves institutional clashes – that is, movements of resistance and destabilization of the order –, we seek to understand how the antagonisms shape the process. With the Weberian epistemological matrix, we conceive institutions as clusters of subjects who act by attributing meaning to their action. This is important, because, although we present, further on, a structural view of the process, referring also to the bodies, sectors, departments, etc., we are not disregarding that all these structures, even though they form sets that transcend the mere result of the sum of individuals, they are, in the last case, people who give them shape, in their actions. We will see that the contradictions immanent in the apprehension of distance education and face-to-face education as dichotomous modalities, denying each other, constitute the basis of the struggles that move institutionalization as an essentially dialectical process. However, without losing sight of the historical-social conditions that make any actions possible, we are always aware that institutionalization is, to any extent, a human phenomenon, that is, driven by and dependent on subjects, who interpret reality and, thus, act in different ways.

## METHODOLOGY

Before proceeding to the analysis of the data, we summarize our methodology. A synthesis, because, as we said, this article is part of a larger undertaking, involving several steps and methodological procedures. As the results presented here constitute the researchers' view of the totality, there is no way to get rid of the larger research, which would give a false character of partial analysis, when the interpretations of this text were only possible due to the contact with all data, including the collection processes. But the presentation of the methodology in its entirety, without being synthetic, would tend to consume too many pages, leaving us less space for what we understand to be the main contribution of this article; that is, the causal explanation of the phenomenon. Therefore, this text is an excerpt from the doctoral research carried out within the scope of the Graduate Program in Education at the Federal University of São Carlos (PPGE-UFSCar), developed as part of the efforts of the Study and Research Group on Innovation in Education, Technologies and Languages (Horizon-UFSCar Group). This is an investigation submitted to the Ethics Committee for Research on Human Beings of UFSCar, which was approved through opinion number 2,647,439. In this sense, we used methodological triangulation in the research as a way of collecting and analyzing data from different instruments and strategies. We seek to apprehend the phenomenon in view of its large scale, using, specifically, the methodological procedures indicated in Chart 1.

Chart 1 – Methodological research procedures.

| Instruments or Strategies | Characteristics   |
|---------------------------|---|
| Documentary analysis      | We analyzed, specifically, the Institutional Development Plans (IDP), the Institutional Pedagogical Projects (IPP) and the regiment of the DE management bodies available on the internet of 40 federal and state universities that work within the UAB System. The combination of the institution's acronym followed by the acronym “DE” was used in the searches.               |
| Virtual focus group       | A total of 4 virtual focus groups were carried out. The conversations were asynchronous, in the form of text and through WhatsApp. Each group lasted approximately 1 month, and all were moderated by the first author of this article. The first group had 11 training teachers/appliers. The second had the participation of 7 tutors (face-to-face and virtual). The third and |

|                           |  |
|---------------------------|--|
|                           | fourth had, respectively, 8 and 4 students and alumni of undergraduate and/or graduate courses in distance education. All participants had in common the experience within the scope of the UAB System.  |
| Semi structured interview | A total of 19 interviews were carried out. All of them took place through digital technologies, using software for web conferencing. The duration of each conversation was approximately 1 hour. All interviews had a semi-structured script and were recorded and later transcribed for data analysis. Training teachers/appliers, tutors (face-to-face and virtual), students or alumni, as well as managers participated in this stage. All had in common the experience within the scope of the UAB System.  |
| Delphi Technique          | 10 experts in the area of public distance education were invited. Thus, the researcher presented the participants with an initial version of the questionnaire that, through three rounds, was improved until a consensus was reached. This questionnaire is the collection instrument used in the next step. The experts had in common their experience within the scope of the UAB System, especially in strategic management positions.   |
| Virtual questionnaire     | After being refined using the Delphi technique, a virtual questionnaire was sent to managers who work or have worked within the scope of the UAB System. The questionnaire had open and closed questions, involving 5 main topics: planning, organization, infrastructure, personnel (human resources) and student service. The questions were designed mainly based on Ferreira and Carneiro (2015) and Brasil (2017). In total, we obtained 44 answers. The data were filtered so that, in this research, we only used the responses of university managers (state and federal) with greater experience in management positions in their respective institutions. In those universities where more than one manager answered the questionnaire, the data were filtered, so that the 25 final answers specifically represent 25 different institutions. |

Source: the authors.

To conceptualize the instruments in Chart 1 without incurring in excesses that would be counterproductive to our further analysis, given the limited space of this text, we emphasize that virtual focus groups can be defined as a collection method that is similar to the face-to-face focus group, with the difference of being carried out in virtual environments, without the need for the physical presence of the participants (ABREU; BALDANZA; GONDIM, 2009). Despite the limitations, this format has some advantages, such as the possibility of bringing together participants from different regions, overcoming spatial barriers. We also mention the versatility in the production of data, since tools such as WhatsApp – used in our study – allow the creation of a document with the entire conversation recorded in text, in a practical and simple way.

As for the Delphi technique, it “is based on the selection of a group of informants socialized with the theme or context to be investigated, to which a questionnaire is applied, with exploratory characteristics, assembled to collect preliminary information that will be analyzed, defining the first round” (ANTUNES, 2014, p. 66). This strategy can be used for different purposes, including the creation and validation of data collection instruments. The Delphi technique is a selection of experts to submit several rounds of an instrument (such as the questionnaire). At each new round, the researcher must present a summary of previous analyses, ensuring anonymity. The proposal is to seek a consensus, as the participants have the chance, at each new round, to review their answers, in view of the information presented by the other participants.

Regarding the semi-structured interview adopted, the collection was organized from a comprehensive perspective. According to Kaufmann (2013), the comprehensive process aims to interpret and explain reality through the data collected. The author states that the understanding of the subject is just an instrument, and the comprehensive explanation of the social is the main objective of the researcher (KAUFMANN, 2013). Focusing on intropathy, the interpretation of the data was directed to the attempt to understand the reality through the eyes of the interviewed individuals. Data appreciation was centered

to propose causal explanations for the phenomenon, considering the subjective meaning attributed to social action.

For the analysis, we used qualitative and quantitative approaches. For Valerio and Paniago (2020), adapting the analysis method and procedures to the research objectives is essential to reach the proposed questions. According to Abreu, Baldanza and Gondim (2009), the combination makes it possible to delve into issues that sometimes cannot be measured numerically. That is why complementarity, according to these authors, is perhaps the path most aligned with the needs of social phenomena. Thus, we emphasize that our study starts from a multifaceted approach, based on different collection instruments to understand the object in all its complexity. We understand the methodological triangulation as a way of using different approaches, methods and sources of collection, reaching more in-depth results and under different perspectives.

## THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PROCESS OF INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF PUBLIC DISTANCE EDUCATION

First, we analyzed the data collected in our research to define the empirical characteristics that make up institutionalization. We know that, in public universities, the UAB System is the main driver of distance education (FERREIRA; CARNEIRO, 2015). Through it, many institutions had their first or most significant experience in the modality. Others, even though they had participated in distance courses considered pioneers, adapted to the UAB as a way to raise resources and invest massively in distance education, as shown by Barrera (2018) in the case of the *University of Brasília* (UnB). In this sense, as soon as the modality enters the institutional bosom from a specific public policy, we witness the beginning of the resistance processes. According to Mill and Veloso (2021), institutionalizing a DE system involves the movement of reception and naturalization beyond the design of courses, going through aspects such as structuring subjects, teacher training, monitoring students, process management, etc. These authors also claim that, while it is inserted in the context of the institution, sometimes already accommodated and established in terms of face-to-face courses, it generates the destabilization of the structure. This precedes the DE integration and accommodation processes.

In the case of public institutions, due to their notably bureaucratic character, based on consultative and deliberative bodies that, representing the different instances of the university community, direct the actions, it is clear that the concern generated by the presence of distance courses is accompanied by strong movements of debate imbued with prejudice. This may be related to several factors, such as reluctance with regard to innovation or even fear about the quality of courses (NASCIMENTO; VIEIRA, 2016). Therefore, in addition to external obstacles, related to elements such as cutting resources or linking to projects, the modality also faces internal problems, such as the resistance of agents and structures (BARRERA, 2018). In any case, the UAB System invested massively in the expansion of distance education, contributing to the structuring of managing bodies, expansion of infrastructure and technologies, hiring technical-administrative staff, and the selection of professors to work in distance courses. This public policy of induction was the main driving force responsible for distance courses in universities. Even though there have been resistance movements in the face of the disquiet and destabilization provided by the presence of distance education in the structure, UAB funding boosted the modality, and, throughout the internal debates, important advances were achieved, such as insertion in the bureaucratic apparatus ( Table 1).

Table 1 – Presence of distance education in the university's normative documents.

| Miscellaneous normative documents  | Yes            | No             |
|--|----------------|----------------|
| Institutional Development Plan (IDP)                                       | 22<br>(88.00%) | 3<br>(12.00%)  |
| Statute or bylaws of the institution                                       | 13<br>(52.00%) | 12<br>(48.00%) |
| Resolution regarding the use of distance courses in face-to-face education | 15<br>(60.00%) | 10<br>(40.00%) |
| Didactic organization regulations  | 9              | 16             |

|   |                |                |
|---|----------------|----------------|
|   | (36.00%)       | (64.00%)       |
| Pedagogical Political Project of face-to-face courses | 17<br>(68.00%) | 8<br>(32.00%)  |
| Regulations of the DE Management bodies               | 15<br>(60.00%) | 10<br>(40.00%) |

Source: the authors

With the exception of resolutions referring to the offer of distance courses in face-to-face education, DE is already included in most other normative documents of the 25 institutions represented by the managers participating in the investigation. This data indicates an advance in institutionalization, which, in different ways, can contribute to reducing prejudice and resistance, which is crucial to ensuring the ability to reproduce. Other important processes have also erupted within the institutional framework, such as debates related to the incorporation of teaching effort in distance courses within the bureaucracy. In some realities, as we identified in the interviews, it was possible to equate the work in distance education with that of face-to-face education. In the questionnaire, we found that 11 universities represented by the managers in the study (44% of the sample) already consider the teaching effort in distance education as an element of performance evaluation for career progression. The same amount (44%) also considers the work in distance education as a responsibility of the teacher to fill the weekly workload.

In addition to the gradual insertion of the modality in the bureaucratic apparatus, the induction of the UAB System provided the creation of management bodies. Structuring as nuclei, secretariats, directorships or superintendencies, these bodies have been responsible for taking the lead in distance education actions in the institution, being responsible not only for offering and structuring distance courses, but also for offering training and support to professors, organization of scientific events in the area, production of research, development of teaching materials with digital technologies, dialogue with other institutions to establish partnerships, among others. Despite the specificities regarding each experience, it appears that these management bodies have become fundamental in the process of insertion of the modality, moving institutional debates and contributing decisively to advances in institutionalization. When we agree that institutionalizing represents reducing resistance and ensuring the accommodation of new practices, such bodies, constituted as the vanguard, it has been essential in the process of incorporation of distance education.

In any case, if the data show us that some steps were climbed, this did not occur without intense struggle within the universities. In the interviews, the word “struggle” appeared in the speech of several participants to define institutionalization as a process of overcoming prejudices, involving internal conflicts. Let's see examples:

We... we have, it's... *struggled* [sighs showing a certain tiredness when thinking about it], in this sense of achieving this inclusion [of distance education in the university's budget matrix], why? We, as professors of... of this academic unit, often, we end up hearing, from some people who are resistant to distance education, that our salary is paid by the budget matrix and that it is paid by face-to-face courses [...] So, our struggle is for it to be equated [the performance in distance education with that in face-to-face education in terms of progression in the teaching career], because we work in the same way, we work with... also with research, with, yeah... outreach, and we also work in the administrative part, we have... we do everything in the same way as those who work in the course are... face-to-face, right. So we always ask for this equivalence (MANAGER A<sup>5</sup>).

We have [DE representation in the higher councils], it was a *struggle*, right? [...] Huh. So, it was a *struggle*, like, to get the coordinators, mainly from the UAB offer, to participate, to have a seat on the campus council, on the teaching commission. So, there is an ordinance, for these coordinators, you know, an internal ordinance, they have a seat in the meetings of... council, of the teaching committee, ok? [...] And... a *struggle* for these distance education courses, is... offered

<sup>5</sup> Out of respect for the confidentiality of the participants, we maintained anonymity by replacing the names with the respective profile followed by a letter of the alphabet. For example, the managers participating in the research will be called “Manager A”, “Manager B”, “Manager C” and so on.



by... by the Open University of Brazil, to be recognized as courses of the institution too, right? So, it was always the *struggle*, the ordinance, you know, seats, it's... it's... the... the institution also absorbs the student's records, like the face-to-face, right (TRAINING TEACHER/APPLIER M).

Look, first of all it was this big *struggle* that we had, oh, six months on the board. Six months. We took it off the agenda several times when we felt it was dangerous, we took it off the agenda, it's... because we changed the university regiment. We took the words "distance education" out of the regiment. It doesn't have the word "distance", ok? Why? Because we match the courses. Whether the course is distance learning or face-to-face, it is a course. So, the university treats it as a course, it's a course. Just like... so that was a *struggle*, you know? [...]. So, we matched, so matching distance education to face-to-face and transforming everything into teaching was a great *struggle*. It was not easy (MANAGER B).

An issue that we took some time, and still has outstanding points, concerns the internal normative acts in HEIs [Higher Education Institutions]. In the <sup>\*\*\*6</sup> what I saw, and I *fought* hard to change, was to call institutionalization only the initial approval to create a course and approve them in the superior councils. This is not institutionalizing. It's just the first step. Give an institutional character to distance education and give it all the legal instruments for its progress and full success. It seems obvious, but it was only after a long time that attention was paid to things such as: deadlines for dismissals, forms of internal transfer from the distance course to the face-to-face course or vice versa, consideration of the right of students to vote in elections for dean, academic calendars compatible with distance education, in short... (TRAINING TEACHER/APPLIER B).

When describing the advances in the incorporation of distance education, including important movements to include the modality in the bureaucratic apparatus, the participants reveal, in some speeches, the struggles that constitute the process. These are clashes that are recurrently linked to the prejudices and resistance that the modality faces as it becomes part of the institutional routine. Although the development of the DE has contributed to reduce some of the contradictions, especially due to the institutions' successful experiences in training distance students, prejudice persists and has not been entirely overcome. To measure this resistance, we addressed the issue in the questionnaire, and the managers indicated their perspective on a scale from 1 (no prejudice/resistance) to 5 (a lot of prejudice/resistance) for each of the listed contexts. We quantified the answers and calculated the arithmetic mean, excluding those managers who, in each item, indicated "I don't know how to inform" (Table 2).

Table 2 – Level of perceived prejudice in distance education.

| Contexts                              | Arithmetic mean of perceived bias |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Professors of face-to-face education  | 4                                 |
| Professors working in both modalities | 1.66                              |
| Technical-administrative employees    | 2.77                              |
| Dean office                           | 2.16                              |
| Pro-rectory office                    | 2.16                              |
| Departaments                          | 2.58                              |
| Managers                              | 2.91                              |
| Face-to-face education students       | 3.21                              |

Source: the authors.

In the view of managers, prejudice among professors who work in face-to-face education is still great, followed by that prejudice among students in face-to-face courses. In other contexts, prejudice

<sup>6</sup> We have hidden the university acronym out of respect for the confidentiality of the research participants. This will also be repeated at other times when the institution's acronym was mentioned by the interviewee.

is below level 3; that is, below the level considered median on the scale from 1 to 5 presented to the research participants. To deepen the data, we approached this theme in the interviews, allowing us to demonstrate that resistance still exists in the institutions, although, in the perception of some professionals, it has decreased over time.

There is an institutional prejudice, it's... because, for example, of... the lack of representation that we talked about at the beginning, there's no representation in the councils, right? DE doesn't... doesn't dialogue as it should with the Dean of Education, with the Dean of Extension, Dean of Research... it doesn't have one, right... there is no greater interaction. It could have... and that ends up... it's still something, right... in a smaller dose of prejudice, right? (TRAINING TEACHER/APPLIER F).

Because, well... this I see at \*\*\* and at other universities like \*\*\*, there are areas that are very prejudiced against distance education, at \*\*\* there are many professors who are absolutely against distance education, at \*\* \* Also... so, what happens... as these universities did not truly incorporate distance education as their own, they leave it to Cederj... nobody thinks, nobody looks into it, nor... to... to dialogue to develop these projects [together with professors from different universities that participate in Cederj] (TRAINING TEACHER/APPLIER L).

Yes. It was big [prejudice before the pandemic] because of what I'm telling you. Because, part of the prejudice, it didn't come from the guy thinking that doing distance education was bad. It's from the mix that it brought. Additional work, lack of control over what is happening. A... a lack of knowledge of what was there in that... in that distance education action, because it was very focused and very on top of a group that was the same group that was repeating itself for... from the beginning, with few new additions, right? So, she had this prejudice... the student who doesn't... thinks... is... and... and the following thing is something, very connected to the labor issue, right, in the case of teachers, with speeches that there was no discussion, that... then the guy doesn't like it, because he didn't have experience, he thinks, you know, that it has to be like this, that it's only the face-to-face that solves, right (MANAGER D).

No, in general, there is no department, therefore, that is against [DE]. There are professors who are against it. Not department as a whole. So much so that in... in science and technology, already... the subjects, when they are reformulated, they already include the use of distance education in part of the course. They're already so reformulating leaving the gap. Although many are not using it, but the subject is already able to... to use it (MANAGER B).

The persistence of prejudice in universities demonstrates an important facet of institutionalization. We refer to the attempts to reject distance education, resisting it, leading to struggles that are fundamental in the movement of the process. In this sense, our data also show critical aspects, such as the representation of distance education in university councils, since the modality does not have this representation in 13 (52%) of the universities whose managers answered to the questionnaire. When discussing the presence of distance education in the councils or about the inclusion of distance courses in the budget matrix, for example, Manager A and Manager B even stated that, at certain times, they had to step back and withdraw the subject of the agenda, since the clashes could incur greater reluctance. If distance education still faces prejudice and resistance, promoting institutional struggles, we believe that this stems, at least partially, from the dependence on public notices adopted by the UAB System, as seen in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3 – Budget forecast for distance education provision.

| Budget forecast                                  |               |
|--|---------------|
| For courses only under the UAB System            | 8<br>(32.00%) |
| For courses outside the scope of the UAB System  | 1<br>(4.00%)  |
| For all distance courses                         | 1<br>(4.00%)  |
| There is no budget forecast for distance courses | 10            |

|              |               |
|--------------|---------------|
|              | (40.00%)      |
| I don't know | 5<br>(20.00%) |

Source: the authors.

Table 4 – Main subsidies to finance distance education.

| Subsidies   | Yes            | No             |
|---|----------------|----------------|
| Resources from the UAB System   | 23<br>(92.00%) | 2<br>(8.00%)   |
| The institution's own budget matrix                                       | 6<br>(24.00%)  | 19<br>(76.00%) |
| Resources from the support foundation                                     | 3<br>(12.00%)  | 22<br>(88.00%) |
| Paid postgraduate courses   | 4<br>(16.00%)  | 21<br>(84.00%) |
| Resources from the private sector   | 2<br>(8.00%)   | 23<br>(92.00%) |
| Promotion projects of federal, state or municipal governments or entities | 9<br>(36.00%)  | 16<br>(64.00%) |

Source: the authors.

Adding two points from Table 3, we observed that, in 72% of the universities participating in the study, there is either no budget forecast or this forecast is linked only to the courses offered under the UAB System. In 23 (92%) of the institutions, the main financial subsidies for the modality come from this public policy, so that other sources of resources are scarce in the vast majority of realities. Thus, in approximately 15 years of specific support for distance education through the UAB, the almost total dependence of universities on external funding, outside the universities' budget matrix, is still observed. In the interviews with managers and professors, the need for more resources and/or linking the resources to the budget matrix was also recurrent.

In our view, this dependence on the UAB System not only weakens the continuity of distance courses and makes the institutionalization of distance education difficult, but also reveals that the modality is still linked to a specific model. The need to resort to external funding as a way to ensure distance education practices makes universities maintain the larger structure established by a public policy. Selection of tutors (distance and face-to-face) through public notices, granting of scholarships to professors who work in the courses, use of face-to-face support centers, greater targeting of proposals for training teachers and managers, among others, are just some of the characteristics that define the UAB. Even though progress has been made in some ways regarding the incorporation of distance education, experiences in public universities are still largely dependent on external funding and, consequently, on an established model that acts coercively in the materialization of course proposals. Coercive pressure within the organizational environment, which includes State action (DIMAGGIO; POWELL, 2005), plays an important role in the configuration of public distance courses.

The way how this UAB model was conceived and as it is lately maintained in universities brings a series of contradictions that directly contribute to the maintenance of dichotomies between realities. In the first place, as it is a public policy that ensures distance courses in a project nature, distance education is assigned a status of activity parallel to the institutional routine. The problems that permeate the costing format established by the UAB, granting scholarships to professors and tutors and making work precarious, are also decisive in the contradictions that feed prejudice and resistance. Pesce (2007) discusses the contradictory elements of the institutionalization of distance education in Brazil, addressing issues such as training proposals less interested in critical capacity than in technical-instrumental training, dependence on multilateral organizations in education conceptions, democratization of access without concern for quality, etc.

From our analyses, we can list, without exhausting the discussion, other contradictions specifically deriving from the UAB model: inclusion of professors – tutors and other external

professionals – in a highly excluding work regime – without employment relationship, with precarious remuneration, without direct insertion in the bureaucracy etc.; the use of face-to-face support centers that, in practice, constitute, for many students and courses, spaces for formal evaluation with the loss of the ideals of decentralization of university activities; the model instituted by public promotion policy in contrast to attempts at institutional adequacy – are they UAB or university courses?; consideration of students as students of the institution, however, without the due equalization of opportunities such as research grants, student aid and others; etc.<sup>7</sup>

Given this, our data reveal the driving force of institutionalization as an essentially dialectical phenomenon. The dichotomous visions between distance education and face-to-face education, which permeate the routine of universities, is established as a central point of the institutional struggles that move and outline the advances, but also setbacks in the incorporation of the modality. We understand that, when distance courses are inserted in the light of the model established by the UAB, realities are conceived in a kind of antagonism. The precariousness of teaching (VELOSO, 2020), the fear that the modality may decrease the quality of public higher education, the fear that distance education may “steal” students from face-to-face (TRAINING TEACHER/APPLIERS), among others reasons that lead to the view that both realities would be antagonists in a struggle for resources and survival. It is as if distance education, given its condition as an emergency project and policy, conceived as alien to the institutional routine, incurs contradictions that culminate in the attempt to deny face-to-face education, however, rooted in universities due to its historical presence, the face-to-face education reacts to the inclusion of distance courses with resistance. Often, these two modalities are mistakenly conceived as substitutes, and not as complementary.

With all these characteristics, we reaffirm that, in the manner in which it has been developed, public distance education, linked to the UAB System, is involved in contradictions, given that distance courses are positioned, in many ways, in an antagonistic way when it comes to respect to face-to-face education. Links to projects and partial or total dependence on external resources give the modality a status of activity parallel to the institutional routine. Contradictions also permeate the antagonistic visions between the specificities of distance education and face-to-face education, as if they were irreconcilable realities or that need to fight for sovereignty. The clashes over resources, which were intensifying while the UAB's funding was dwindling, also intensified the antagonisms. Sometimes, resistance and prejudice relate precisely to this conception that realities would be contradictory, not being able to coexist in a harmonious and fruitful way. This reciprocal negation between distance education and face-to-face education not only generates institutional tensions, but also moves the entire dialectical process of institutionalization. The data from the interviews demonstrate these dichotomies, which, even today, persist.

Because it's as if distance education wasn't something from the university... it's from Cederj<sup>8</sup>, and the university endorses it. It is something that is still very distant... so, although it is in the IDP, in pedagogical, research and extension terms, it is still one thing, it is... very distant from... because internally universities already have difficulties in dialogue between the different areas. Some more, some less... well, you know (TRAINING TEACHER/APPLIER I).

And this is not just for the \*\*\*, no, this happens in all federal and state universities, because they all work within the scope of public notices, right, even so, we already have... we end up having this periodicity, because all... every four, five years there is a new public notice, the university ends up offering the same course, so this gives the false illusion that the course is from... the university, but not, like, the course itself... it's only there with... with the university's seal of approval, but the course is promoted by another body, in this case by Capes. So, this ends up being bad, and people who are not part of the environment say: “well, it's not from the

<sup>7</sup> Due to the more general nature of our research, covering several universities, we are not disregarding other contradictions, nor are we affirming that these mentioned problems are present in this way in all realities. These are just a few examples of the contradictory movements that can be found in public distance education financed by the UAB System.

<sup>8</sup> Currently, the Consortium Center for Distance Higher Education of the State of Rio de Janeiro (Cederj), also called Foundation Center for Science and Higher Distance Education of the State of Rio de Janeiro (Cecierj), brings together, in a partnership with the state government, the higher education institutions in Rio de Janeiro offering, in a consortium, proposals and courses in distance education.

university, oh so this is a course without value, oh this is a course that is just for, it's... for the student to enter, it's easier, it's something like that". It's a lot of prejudice and little knowledge (MANAGER C).

So, yes, prejudice, but this prejudice, it was... it was changing the way, right. The prejudice before was because you had a lot, "ah, it's the guy... the bad guy [DE student] who can't pass, who doesn't have time to study, and... if he was really good he would be in the night [course], right". Without understanding the profile of the guy who is studying. *This migrated to a problem of a mixture between...a- competition between DE and face-to-face education, within the university* (MANAGER D).

Constituted as an eminently human phenomenon, the institutionalization of distance education has the founding characteristic: it fights to overcoming resistance and prejudice, and these result from contradictions, that is, from the dichotomous visions between the two realities. In view of the data, we realize that there have been advances in some aspects, such as the inclusion of distance courses in an important part of the bureaucratic apparatus, with special attention to normative documents. Prejudice, at least in the perception of managers, has also decreased in strategic sectors, such as rectory, pro-rectories and departments. However, if the dependence on external support still persists, as well as the prejudice among professors that contributes to the maintenance of contradictions and antagonisms, how will the effective incorporation of distance education occur? We understand that this path converges to the notion of hybrid education. For that, we propose dialectics as a conceptual instrument to explain the development of the phenomenon. We will address this in subsequent sections.

## INSTITUTIONALIZATION AS A DIALECTIC PHENOMENON

We previously demonstrated those specificities that make up the institutionalization of distance education in public universities. By placing contradictions at the heart of the process, we use dialectics as a conceptual instrument to explain causal relationships. Our focus remains on the action of subjects, as we understand institutions as an intertwining of individuals who act. All structures are, in the final analysis, agglomerations of people who, interpreting concrete reality, attribute meaning to their actions. But we will seek, from here, to discuss the larger structures of the DE institutionalization process. We begin with a definition of dialectic, clarifying the concept used, and then we present the way in which this concept is linked to the organic incorporation of distance education in institutions. Finally, we seek to explain the *modus operandi* of the process, paying attention to what, in dialectics, we understand as double negation.

### Definition of the concept of dialectic used in the analysis

We propose to define the concept used to explain the development of the institutionalization process. Dialectics is here understood as a conceptual instrument. Such consideration is essential, as we reiterate our epistemological matrix, which is comprehensive sociology. This provides us with a way of conducting the research, focusing on the subjective meaning attributed to social action. Furthermore, even though we use Marxist conceptions, we are not using the concept in a bias strictly related to Marxism<sup>9</sup>. Because, as Musse (2005) points out, the discussions focused on the methodological orthodoxy of the work of Marx and Engels are extremely complex, with perspectives, such as that of Lukács (2003), that advocate the use of historical and dialectical materialism as a fundamentally revolutionary theory, without the possibility of splitting with the practice or even breaking with the idea of totality. Therefore, our use of Marxist contributions concerns the construction of conceptual instruments that enable the causal explanation of empirical reality. However, our methodological fidelity

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<sup>9</sup> This is also because the discussions by Engels (2015) that we used as one of the references for the concept of dialectics generated certain controversies and debates in the academy. Part of these discussions refers to the author's conception that extends the appreciations to phenomena of nature. It is not in our interest to debate, in this text, epistemological issues of dialectics in Marxism and its link to class struggle and revolutionary theory. We only seek understanding of the concept to explain institutionalization.

remains aligned with comprehensive sociology, as a way of understanding the influence of the phenomenon on social action.

Therefore, the concept of dialectics in this article comes from Hegelian philosophy. In Aristotelian thought, truth is identified as the absence of contradiction, because “if a thing is equal to itself and different from itself, if it is equal to itself and equal to another thing, it is a contradiction, undeniable indication of a falsehood” (SADER, 2007, p. 09). The revolution in this way of thinking came with the work of Hegel, responsible for shedding light on the importance of contradiction to understand the essential dynamics of each phenomenon. “Capturing the contradiction becomes a symptom of apprehending the real movement of phenomena” (SADER, 2007, p. 09). The contradictions make up the Hegelian logic as a way of understanding the essence of each pole and the meaning of the mutual relationship. Perhaps, the complete example of the Hegelian dialectic can be identified in the relationship between master and slave, unraveling the interdependence of determinations that are, in appearance, opposed, but are intertwined (SADER, 2007). This means that this relationship only exists through contradiction, in such a way that each apparently contradictory element has significance only through relationships with its opposite.

For Engels (2015), submitting nature or human history to intellectual activity, what stands out to us is the infinite intertwining of interconnections and interactions. Now, “nothing remains what and as it was or where it was, but everything moves, changes, becomes and withers” (ENGELS, 2015, p. 49). However, despite this revolution in human thought, which places contradiction at the heart of the analysis of phenomena, Engels (2015) states that, while natural science developed and, consequently, specialized in modernity, objects passed to be apprehended disconnected from the totality. Its existence is analyzed independently, in its isolation and apart from the connections that intertwine it. According to Engels (2015), when Bacon and Locke transferred this way of conceiving things from natural science to philosophy, what the author calls the “specific narrow-mindedness of the last centuries” originated, that is, the metaphysical way of thinking. Marx and Engels' (2007) critique of German philosophers reaches precisely this way of understanding historical phenomena, which, unlike the materialist perspective, apprehends representations of objective reality, admitting them as if they were, by themselves, reality itself. Discussions focus, then, on the plane of ideas, restricting themselves to mere ideology. The debate on materiality is disconnected, since the very criticisms of the human condition are reduced to phraseology, without any commitment to the transformation of concrete reality.

According to Musse (2005), Engels' theoretical effort, aimed at defining the pillars of historical and dialectical materialism, recognizes the importance of Hegel, but proposes a total inversion of the idealism in which German philosophy had fallen. The materialist perspective subverts the Hegelian logic, since, for Marxism, contradictions permeate the historical-social reality, that is, materiality. According to Engels (2015, p. 39), Hegel's philosophy failed to understand that nature develops in time, by not admitting “one after the other”, but only “one next to the other”. Therefore, it failed not to admit the intrinsically historical and material character of the dialectic. From this comes the famous conception that all history is the history of the class struggle (ENGELS, 2015). We therefore emphasize the importance of the contribution of Marx and Engels (2007) in criticizing the split between reality and thought promoted by philosophical idealism. Metaphysics, which would have Hegel as one of its exponents, would take the representations of material and concrete reality as reality itself. This apprehension of objects in an isolated, independent way, disconnecting them from their intersections and, therefore, from their totality, incurs an idealism that, according to Marx and Engels (2007), is to maintain class society by removing discussions from materiality and insert them only on the plane of ideas, reducing themselves to mere phraseology.

Thus, the Marxist contribution to dialectics, among many other things, concerns the enhancement of understanding of the historical character of social phenomena. Furthermore, it subverts idealist thinking, to focus on material reality, especially the development of productive forces and the exchange of subjects as determining factors that even condition philosophical thoughts. We recognize the importance of materiality for the meaning of the dialectic used here, considering that the institutionalization process, as it develops within universities, cannot be separated from the historical-social conditions that condition it. The phenomenon of the incorporation of distance education within the institutional core moves from the contradictions, as well as the clash established between the

apparently opposing or conflicting poles. However, the interpretation that the subjects make of the concrete reality proves to be basal in the process of attributing subjective meaning to social action. Here, we consider dialectics as an eminently human phenomenon, as institutional contradictions are also created by the action of individuals. If the agency is based on reciprocal expectations, guided by certain social pressures generated by the organizational culture or even by the bureaucratic apparatus, the driving force of the process depends on those interpretations of reality by individuals that, in themselves, incur a contradictory character. The elements external to the subjectivity of acting are, therefore, the conditioning factors of this interpretive movement entangled in contradictions, such as prejudice and resistance.

### **The dialectic in the institutionalization process of distance education**

Due to their hierarchical-bureaucratic character<sup>10</sup>, universities are resistant to change, so their movements are slow and often involve internal struggles and clashes. Ultimately, they are clusters of subjects who, with conflicting ideas, shape institutional practices. The institutionalization of distance education is an essentially dialectical phenomenon, in which contradictions must be perceived as fundamental forces of development. We believe that the process of incorporating the modality should be analyzed from a perspective that considers the relationships of reciprocity, clarifying the opposing and, at the same time, interdependent elements. Historicity is a determining factor, because it allows us to observe the objects that become and wither within their historical path (ENGELS, 2015), and material reality guides and conditions the entire process. But we understand that interpretation is still the fundamental element of institutionalization. That is, even if materiality is decisive, the way in which individuals conceive it is what will outline the manifestation, in practice, of the dialectical process of incorporation of distance education.

The subjects always act within a context that is constituted as a reference (MACHADO-DASILVA; FONSECA; CRUBELLATE, 2005). However, the meaning attributed to the action is not univocal, and the interpretation that the agents make in the face of material reality will outline the manifestations of institutionalization in the midst of institutional practice. In many situations, the DE incorporation process must overcome not only concrete mishaps, such as lack of budget, the need to adapt the bureaucratic apparatus, the construction of infrastructure, etc., but also problems related to metaphysical thinking or, more precisely, to common sense, such as prejudice, the view of the UAB model as a pure representation of the modality, accommodation to material conditions considered unavoidable or naturalized, among other aspects. We intend to describe this in detail in other reflections.

Although DE was present in some initiatives, it starts to be inserted in universities in an accentuated and systemic way from the UAB System, as previously discussed. Several institutions had their first or most significant experience in the modality through, necessarily, this public policy. Others, in spite of their previous and considered pioneering initiatives – as in the case of UnB –, joined the UAB precisely because it made possible a huge investment that expanded and intensified the actions in distance education within the institutional framework. The research by Barrera (2018) even demonstrates that, for some UnB managers, even the pioneering spirit of the institution must be questioned, since the initiatives in the modality, before the current Law of Directives and Bases of National Education (LDB 9.394/96 – *Lei de Diretrizes e Bases da Educação Nacional*), were restricted to certain sectors, so they were not widely disseminated, not even in the organizational culture. From this point of view, the UAB System is the main driver of distance education in the midst of universities. Since its inception, it has encompassed some precursor projects in the modality and is configured as a reference for promoting public distance courses. Even institutions with a history of working in distance education are decisively influenced by

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<sup>10</sup> According to Vieira and Vieira (2004), federal universities – and, for us, state universities as well – have highly complex organizational structures that are slow to handle demands due to excessive standards. Precisely for this reason, they are resistant to change and present dysfunction in power, insofar as decisions pervade extensive scales whose top bureaucratic leadership is often far from where the demands themselves emanate. Furthermore, the authors emphasize its corporatist character, since sectors are constantly oriented by interests that are more individual or group than institutional. We believe that, in this context, there is a clash and struggle between conflicting interests.

this policy, as they adhere to funding notices as a way of raising funds to intensify, expand or even continue their practices in the modality.

The UAB System also enables the necessary resources for the establishment of DE management bodies in many institutions. In many cases, it is the starting point that, from the perspective of Tolbert and Zucker (1998), ensures the necessary conditions for the stage called habitualization. At the moment when the modality becomes part of institutional practices, even if as a project, the processes of resistance and clash are generated right away. Once the structure that makes it possible to germinate distance education in the institutional core, including, in several experiences, the hiring of professors and other professionals to work in distance courses, pioneer groups are established that are foundational in institutionalization. According to Tolbert and Zucker (1998), the dissemination of a structure is decisively influenced by the performance of champions, that is, individuals or groups of people who work in favor of a certain practice – in this case, we refer to distance education. These subjects are inserted and/or start to organize themselves due to the support offered by the UAB, acting in the universities as agents responsible for defending and disseminating practices in distance learning courses. They are central in the process of objectification of the modality, seeking to structure it and resist the pressures and resistances that are soon perceived within institutional struggles.

We observed that the historical-social reality is decisive since given the country's macro scenario, both in terms of neoliberal policies and in terms of major trends in society, the necessary conditions are created for the emergence of a specific public policy to induce distance education. This materializes actions within universities, capable of also establishing the essential material conditions for the emergence of contradictory movements, which are the driving force of institutionalization as a dialectical process. When distance education is present, made possible by a specific historical-social context, an intensified resistance begins on the part of sectors, professors, students, employees, etc., who seek to reject distance courses. From these institutional disputes, the process of incorporation of distance education, essentially dialectical, moves, in a kind of spiral in which thesis, antithesis and synthesis outline the way in which this same process is constituted. Certainly, there are several elements, including external ones, that exert important coercive pressures, characterizing institutionalization. The fact that distance education actions are guided by a public promotion policy, with its own model, ends up defining the practices in the modality.

However, attention must be paid to the autonomy that universities seek to exercise. This aspect makes coercive pressures take on different shades, influenced by internal actions. In institutionalization, factors such as geographic and historical location of the university, training of agents within institutions and their trajectory that culminates in the construction of subjectivity, materialization of the dialectical process of institutionalization and the resulting peculiar syntheses, among others, are included. Thus, there is no way to talk about the incorporation of distance education as a unilateral and merely sequential phenomenon, with predefined perspectives of evolution. Of course, there are observable trends, as well as a greater likelihood of paths or strategies that can be – and are – adopted. But, given the dependence of the intricate material conditions and the subjectivity of the agents, institutionalization has *sui generis* characteristics.

In the interviews, for example, Manager B states that the distance education adopted at the institution was based on a Canadian model, and this even comes from the research that he, as a scientist, did during his academic career. In other universities, we found that the specificities of the geographic location give a differentiated content to the modality to meet regional needs. Training teacher/applier M, by the way, states that distance education was present since the institution's first IDP, which certainly influenced the institutionalization process that, currently, culminated in the creation of a course linked to the budget matrix. In the case of Manager C's experience, the consideration of the teaching effort in the modality for career progression and filling the weekly teaching hours took on specific contours, including an apparent setback in the dichotomy between distance education and face-to-face education, because the university experienced an atypical situation related to resource management issues.

Summarizing our argument, we define institutionalization as an essentially dialectical process. Because advances in the incorporation of distance education depend on initiatives by subjects, whether individual or collective. It means that this process goes through a mobilization in which an effervescence is created. The beginning of this process depends, as we said earlier, on multivariate factors and,



ultimately, on materials and concrete. Institutionalization, starting from a germ that is also related to the mobilization of those who, for Tolbert and Zucker (1998), could be called champions, generates clashes, especially due to the resistance that the university presents. From this, there is an eminently dialectical character<sup>11</sup>: mobilization and effervescence that drive the entrance of distance education, on the one hand; resistance, prejudice and movements that reject the modality, on the other. Debates and contradictions gradually create syntheses. These imply both improvements in distance education due to the incorporated criticisms and even the weakening and/or maintenance of “ghettos” that depend solely on external financing, surviving on account of the sectors involved and dependent on the modality. Therefore, it is a human process. As this is the case, it depends both on material reality and on the interpretation that the subjects make of it. Certain scenarios and strategies tend to contribute. But legitimacy, being recursive, needs to be constantly renewed, since distance education needs to be reproduced as an institutional and legitimate practice. Because not even the material and concrete reality, nor the insertion of the modality in the bureaucratic apparatus – such as its inclusion in the budget matrix –, are capable of assuring, by themselves, the legitimacy *ad infinitum*. Nor can they inexorably determine progress in this process. Thus, it is reiterated that institutionalization is a dialectical phenomenon constituted by individuals, which involves all the vicissitudes of what is intrinsically human.

### **The *modus operandi* of the institutionalization of distance education**

We understand why the institutionalization of distance education is an essentially dialectical process, but the question still persists: in what specific way does this phenomenon occur? Based on the data of our study, we focused on the explanation of this *modus operandi*. Several sub-processes – if we can call them that – of internal struggle are shaping institutionalization. Nevertheless, we consider that the phenomenon is situated within a larger structure that encompasses all its development. This structure is clearly perceptible from a dialectical perspective. To demonstrate this, it is necessary to resort to the idea of negation of negation, characteristic of the moment of synthesis. For Engels (2015), this double negation is a universal law of extremely broad scope and importance regarding the evolution of nature, history and thought. “In dialectics, denying does not mean simply saying no or declaring that a thing does not exist or destroying it in any way” (ENGELS, 2015, p. 171). To deny, in the dialectical understanding, means to establish the first negation without making the second unfeasible. In this way, the Hegelian concept of *aufheben*, presupposes suppressing, keeping – or conserving – in order, finally, to elevate. The process takes place, initially, because a certain phenomenon – of thought, of nature or even of history – is denied.

However, this negation still preserves what was previously denied, allowing, further on, the synthesis – or the elevation. Marx and Engels (2007) bring this logic, for example, to the explanation of the class struggle and, more specifically, of the development of forms of production and private property. In the first instance, individual property is denied by the so-called original accumulation. Subsequently, with the development of capitalism and the means of production, conditions and contradictions are generated that will lead to the negation of negation; that is, the expropriation of the expropriators, that is, of the capitalists. But Engels (2015) will show that this way of conceiving natural, but also historical, phenomena is present in several other places. Rousseau (1999), as an example, already understood the dialectic when he understood that inequality is generated by progress and that, under despotic tyranny, an extreme is reached in which the oppressed become equal, that is, equal to zero. By the equality that is, at first, denied, one walks to the opposite pole, in which oppression again equates everyone to nothing. This situation generates the necessary conditions for the oppressed themselves, as a consequence, to negate the negation, freeing themselves from despotism (ENGELS, 2015). But how can this understanding be directed to the phenomenon of institutionalization of distance education? Engels (2015) states that each kind of thing has its peculiar way of being denied, resulting in a specific development.

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<sup>11</sup> We understand that this is also related to the concepts of technophilia or technophobia. In these pages, we do not delve into these concepts, but they are important in apprehending the contradictions that permeate the institutionalization of distance education. We suggest reading Lion (1997) and Eco (2008).

Distance education, at a given moment in the development of the UAB, starts to be denied within the institution. This is because, due to the historical conditions and the very situation of the modality in its insertion in universities, a clear dichotomy is generated with face-to-face education. This way of conceiving things, understanding the two modalities as antagonistic, that is, as denying each other, generates the resistance movements that are the mainstay of the process. Distance education appears, in many universities, with the UAB model responsible for creating a series of dichotomies, with external funding that attributes a parallel character to the activities in the modality, the selection of tutors and other professionals who don't have professional stability, the teaching through scholarships without counting the weekly teaching hours, etc. However, when trying to deny face-to-face education, it is strongly rejected, insofar as its apparent opposite is the form rooted in the core of institutions, which has all the bureaucratic apparatus that offers it perpetuity.

Thus, within institutions, distance courses are denied, seen as parallel to the institutional routine. However, in this same denial, resulting from the dichotomous view between the modalities, distance education is not effectively removed, which continues to exist due to material conditions and, due to funding, expands within the routine of institutions. Management bodies are then created, professors are hired to work in distance learning courses, investments are made in physical and technological infrastructure, etc. The distance modality, although denied at first, continues to exist within universities. From there, with all the dialectical clashes that shape the development of institutionalization, the process reaches its apogee. This, in our understanding, is when the negation of the negation will take place. As a matter of fact, that is when will be denied what was denying the organic incorporation of distance education<sup>12</sup>. We believe that this will be possible by overcoming the UAB model and its inherent dichotomies. When this is effectively overcome, the Hegelian *aufheben* will make sense, since distance education and face-to-face education will be so intertwined that the practical separation between realities will be a difficult task. It is about elevating to a hybrid format, exploring the best of both universes, in which the organic incorporation will guarantee the continuity of distance education, so that it and face-to-face education are no longer dichotomous, but complementary and overlapping. In this way, there is a general synthesis of the entire dialectical process.

This convergence and consequent overcoming of antagonisms obviously involves in-depth discussion. Even the legislation that governs distance education needs to be problematized to understand the role of this modality in a society marked by technologies and new educational trends. In any case, we start, synthetically, from two main meanings for the notion of hybrid education, according to Mill and Chaquime (2021): blended learning, as a convergence of distance education environments and face-to-face education; and/or educational process enriched by the pedagogical possibilities resulting from the most current technological resources. We agree with Tori (2017) when he deepens this discussion about the integration between the real and the virtual, since the application of hybrid education can comprise, for example, different levels of organization. In this sense, there is freedom to adapt the activities to each profile of the course, of students, of pedagogical objectives, among others. That is, instead of the dichotomous view that apprehends distance education and face-to-face education as distinct modalities, which must be conceived within a tight format, we arrive at multiform proposals, with adaptation even at the micro level (courses, disciplines, classes, activities etc.). It is not our focus, in the text, to discuss extensively the prognosis of a hybrid education suited to the Brazilian reality. Even because this requires investigations of its own. If it is possible, immediately, to predict the synthesis of this dialectical phenomenon, we envision greater flexibility in the use of "face-to-face" and "distance" depending on the needs of the institution, the target audience, the course, the pedagogical proposal, etc. Although these pages do not fit into the discussion in depth, even because the development of the dialectical process will be responsible for enabling this type of analysis, we register the interest in this topic in future research.

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<sup>12</sup> Following the logic of double denial, it is correct to say that face-to-face education would be denied, creating a hybrid model as a synthesis. However, this has, for us, a specific interpretation. It does not mean that face-to-face education will cease to exist or that it should be overcome. On the contrary, we emphasize the overcoming of the UAB model, as we consider it as one of the main obstacles, today, for the organic incorporation of the distance modality. Therefore, the denial of denial has, for us, the effect of, among other things, denying the dichotomies – which we consider wrong – responsible for making face-to-face education reject distance education.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In this article, we seek to show how the institutionalization of distance education can be seen as an essentially dialectical phenomenon. Given the contradictions that permeate the UAB System, there are intense institutional debates that not only outline but also materialize and move the process. While they deny each other, the modalities sustain struggles arising, to a large extent, from the prejudice that persists in universities. If face-to-face education, due to its historical presence in the midst of institutions, starts to deny distance education, it cannot eradicate it. Especially because the maintenance of external financing, over time, guarantees the historical, social and material conditions for the struggles that give movement to institutionalization. However, dependence on the UAB not only highlights the fragility of distance education courses, but also demonstrates that dichotomies persist in the institutional routine. We assume that the apogee of the process, in which distance education can be organically incorporated into universities, is when the model established by an emergency public policy is overcome, culminating in the harmony between realities. It means that the synthesis, in a structural view, results in hybrid education, in which the qualifiers “face-to-face” and “distance” become secondary, with a greater focus on the educational process.

However, if we understand the overcoming of the UAB model as a *sine qua non* condition for the effective institutionalization of distance education, we must be careful not to generate confusion. Our data show us that, although hybrid education is possibly the synthesis of the entire process, this apogee of organic incorporation of the modality can only be reached when the institutional conditions are duly ensured. Each university has its development, depending on the historical-social reality, but also on the institutional actions of the subjects. We want to say that rejecting the UAB, without having reached the dialectical conditions of the process for its real overcoming, tends to lead to the dissolution of distance education. The dialectic understood here is not simply a rational process, in which subjects, at a given moment, decide to abandon the external financing of distance education courses. It is a whole conjuncture, resulting from the internal processes of thesis, antithesis and synthesis that ultimately lead to the overcoming of the UAB, insofar as, given the historical-social conditions, in addition to the structure and organizational culture, overcoming funding policy becomes a somewhat natural action. Overcoming the UAB System means reaching the dialectical conditions that culminate in the breakdown of dichotomies, reaching the superposition of realities, which is different from simply denying external funding which, in many institutions, is still the only way to maintain distance education.

There are several implications of this dialectical process. The model instituted by the UAB, for example, introduced a vision in the subjects that contributed to the maintenance of antagonisms. Furthermore, overcoming these dichotomies must take into account possible strategies to reduce prejudice and resistance. No less important is the discussion of how the focus on social action can be decisive in directing institutional practices to advancing the institutionalization of distance education. These and other analyzes are part of our research enterprise, but will later be considered and shared in other studies and reflections. We recognize that, in addition to the proposition presented here, as a way of explaining the phenomenon, many other questions and unknowns arise. Our intention in this article is simply to share a new look at institutionalization. Based on our definitions, we hope that other debates can be part of the research on distance education.

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