Article

Obstacles in the dialectical process of institutionalizing public distance education

Entraves no processo dialético de institucionalização da educação a distância pública

Barreras en el proceso dialéctico de institucionalización de la educación a distancia pública

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to describe some of the obstacles that persist in the process of organic incorporation of public distance education (DE). We take, as a reference, the Universidade Aberta do Brasil (UAB) System. As for the methodology, we used methodological triangulation in the light of qualitative and quantitative approaches. Our epistemological matrix is the Weberian comprehensive sociology. Besides, we use dialectics as a conceptual instrument. Regarding the methodological procedures, we undertook: document analysis, virtual focus groups, semi-structured interviews, Delphi technique and virtual questionnaire. With the study, we discussed two main mishaps that still persist in the incorporation process: the UAB System as synonymous of DE and the institutionalization of precariousness. The research comes to the conclusion that overcoming the current funding policy and the coagulated ways of interpreting reality is an essential condition for organic incorporation.

Keywords: Distance Education. Institutionalization. Organic Incorporation. Universidade Aberta do Brasil (UAB) System.

RESUMO

O objetivo deste artigo é descrever alguns dos principais entraves que persistem no processo de incorporação orgânica da educação a distância (EaD) pública. Partimos do Sistema Universidade Aberta do Brasil (UAB). Quanto à metodologia, usamos a triangulação metodológica à luz das abordagens qualitativa e quantitativa. Nossa matriz epistemológica é a sociologia compreensiva weberiana. Utilizamos, aliás, a dialética enquanto instrumento conceitual. Sobre os procedimentos metodológicos, empreendemos: análises documentais, grupos focais virtuais, entrevistas semiestruturadas, técnica Delphi e questionário virtual. Com o estudo, discutimos dois principais percalços que ainda persistem no processo de incorporação, isto é, o Sistema UAB como sinônimo da EaD e a institucionalização da precariedade. A pesquisa chega à conclusão de que superar a atual política de financiamento e as consequentes formas coaguladas de interpretação da realidade é condição indispensável para a incorporação orgânica.

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Palavras-chave: Educação a Distância. Institucionalização. Incorporação Orgânica. Sistema Universidade Aberta do Brasil.

RESUMEN

El propósito de este artículo es describir algunos de los principales obstáculos en el proceso de incorporación orgánica de la educación a distancia (ED) pública. Partimos del Sistema Universidad Abierta de Brasil (UAB). Utilizamos la triangulación metodológica con enfoques cualitativos y cuantitativos. La matriz epistemológica es la sociología comprensiva weberiana. Utilizamos también la dialéctica como instrumento conceptual. Los procedimientos metodológicos son: análisis documental, grupos focales virtuales, entrevistas semiestructuradas, técnica Delphi y cuestionario virtual. Con el estudio, discutimos dos percances principales que aún persisten en el proceso de incorporación: el Sistema UAB como sinónimo de ED y la institucionalización de la precariedad. La investigación llega a la conclusión de que la superación de la actual política de financiación y las consiguientes formas coaguladas de interpretar la realidad es una condición imprescindible para la incorporación orgánica.

Palabras clave: Educación a Distancia. Institucionalización. Incorporación Orgánica. Sistema Universidad Abierta de Brasil (UAB).

INTRODUCTION

One of the central discussions in the field of distance education (DE) in Brazil concerns its institutionalization. In Brazil, institutions that have traditionally only offered face-to-face courses commonly use this modality. This destabilizes the internal order, which has to raise funds, adapt infrastructure, overcome prejudices, invest in training, etc. When there was a pandemic, the issue became even more important because of the differences between distance education and emergency remote teaching (or similar terms) and because it is important to make distance learning courses permanent to ensure the continuity and quality of educational plans that use digital information and communication technologies (DICT).

Regarding public universities (state and federal), the debate is nuanced, especially regarding the model for promoting distance education. In these institutions, the main driver of the modality is the Open University of Brazil System (UAB). This policy, although it has contributed to the expansion of public distance learning courses, has engendered contradictions that, even today, constitute setbacks in the process of organically integrating distance learning. One of the main signs of a delay in institutionalization is the lack of external funding. This means that, in most public universities, the resources set aside for the modality are not included in the budget.

Nonetheless, the primary aim of this article is to describe some of the key obstacles that persist in the organic incorporation of public distance education. Our study focuses on the UAB System and its impact on state and federal universities. This policy is central to analyzing the institutionalization of this modality (Ferreira and Carneiro, 2015). It is important to note that this article is an excerpt from the first author's doctoral thesis on the same subject and seeks to examine the phenomenon in depth, including comparisons with the Brazilian context.

After the introduction, the text covers research methodology and procedures. We then proceed to discuss our analytical approach, linking this article to our other recent work. We have now established the theoretical and analytical foundations. We will then talk about two major mistakes

that happened when distance learning courses were made official: the UAB system, which is another name for public distance education, and the phenomenon of making precariousness official. Also, in the text, we present the final considerations that resume and conclude the discussion, pointing out directions and gaps for further research.

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

This article is a snapshot of the doctoral research carried out at the Federal University of São Carlos (UFSCar), as part of the Horizon Group's undertakings. It should be noted that the research was submitted to UFSCar's Human Research Ethics Committee and was approved under opinion number 2647439. Therefore, we briefly describe the main methodological procedures in this section, treating them as a true intellectual craft (Gondim and Lima, 2010). The research process also employed methodological triangulation. This involves combining various tools, strategies, and data collection and analysis sources (Duarte, 2009; Lakatos and Marconi, 2019). The methodological procedures are set out in Chart 1.

INSTITUTIONALIZATION AS A HUMAN AND DIALECTICAL PHENOMENON

In related scientific works, the process of establishing distance learning as an official option can be seen as a leveled continuum that does not happen in a simple black-and-white way (Ferreira and Carneiro, 2015). According to Ferreira, Costa and Mill (2021), it takes the form of a flexible approach to managing both internal and external circumstances. It includes things like structure, technologies, human resources, and culture. This is because, in the Brazilian reality, there is the imposition of a model of universities considered to be "integrated," in which distance education and face-to-face education coexist (Belloni, 2003; Costa, 2012). When a new mode is introduced, it can lead to synergy and convergence. On the other hand, distance education often faces strong resistance and prejudice when it is introduced into an environment that has not yet changed its structure and organization to fit the new needs. We used the same research method for the first author's doctoral thesis. It not only looks at these conflicts that happen when the internal order breaks down, but it also shows how important immanent contradictions are as the driving force behind a process that shapes how people understand micro and macrostructures.

The subsequent analyses in this text are based on our interpretation of the phenomenon of institutionalized distance education. Firstly, we use the Weberian sociological matrix, focusing on social action (Weber, 2015; 2016). According to Weber (2015; 2016), organizations like universities are groups of individuals who, through their reciprocal actions, give movement and shape to what, objectively, has a structural shell. In detail, these individuals operate based on a subjective interpretation of social action. Along these lines, we also use dialectics as a conceptual tool that allows us to explain cause-and-effect relationships (Veloso and Mill, 2022). First, we know that the natural integration of distance learning into public institutions is fraught with problems caused by real-life contradictions. As a result of clashes between what we might call theses and antitheses that produce syntheses, institutionalization moves along a continuum that, as we have said before, can go forward or backward. By talking about different formats for the phenomenon, we understand that, although a certain prognosis that reveals itself sequentially is possible, it is not an inexorable process with predefined paths. Institutionalization is very complicated because it involves the subjects that make up institutional activities acting on each other (Veloso, 2022). This shows how human it is and why it is so awkward.

By dialectics, we are here combining Hegelian and Marxist contributions to arrive at the understanding that, according to Engels (2015, p. 49), both in human history and in nature, "nothing remains what it was or where it was, but everything moves, changes, becomes, and passes away."

Chart 1 – Methodological procedures used in the research.

Methodological procedures	
Tools or collection strategies	Procedure description
Documental analysis	People are looking at the Institutional Development Plans (PDI), Institutional Pedagogical Projects (PPI), and rules of the DL management bodies from 40 state and federal universities in the UAB System that are online or have been online.
Online focus group	We held four virtual focus groups. We conducted all conversations asynchronously, using text messages and the WhatsApp application. Each group lasted approximately 1 month, and they were divided as follows: 1) group with 11 teacher-trainers/applicators; 2) group with 7 tutors (virtual and face-to-face); 3) group with 8 students; and 4) group with 4 students. All the participants had experience in the UAB system in common. The focus groups were drawn up in light of the contributions of Abreu, Baldanza, and Gondim (2009), together with those of Backes et al. (2011) and Duarte (2007).
Semi-structured interview	A total of 18 interviews were conducted. All of them took place via digital technologies, using web conferencing software. Each conversation lasted approximately one hour. We recorded all the interviews using a semi-structured script and transcribed them for data analysis. The participants in this stage were teachers-trainers/applicators, teacher-tutors (face-to-face and virtual), students or former students, as well as managers. They all had experience in the UAB system in common. The interviews were conducted in the light of the comprehensive approach (Kaufmann, 2013).
Delphi Technique	We invited 10 experts in the field of public DL, eight of whom took part in all three rounds, which led to a consensus on the creation and adaptation of the collection instrument used in the next stage. All the experts had experience in the UAB system in common, especially in strategic management positions. As a theoretical reference for the application of the Delphi technique, we used the study by Antunes (2014), as well as the research by Wright and Giovinazzo (2000).
Virtual questionnaire	After the final version of the virtual questionnaire had been developed and improved together with professors specializing in the area using the Delphi technique, it was sent to managers with experience in the UAB system. The questionnaire contained open and closed questions. After filtering the data according to the needs and intentions of the research, we arrived at 25 final responses representing 25 institutions that work or have worked within the UAB System. To draw up the questionnaire, which was then improved using the Delphi technique, we used the report published by Brasil (2017) as a basis, as well as the research by Ferreira and Carneiro (2015).

Source: the authors (2022).

Therefore, Hegel demonstrates that "grasping contradiction is a symptom of understanding the true movement of phenomena" (Sader, 2007, p. 09). Marxists (Marx and Engels, 2007; Marx, 2013; 2017) and materialists, who disagree with Hegel's ideas, support the idea that history and the underlying wholeness that shapes changes in time are what makes things happen. We solidified our understanding of the thing we were studying by calling it "a dialectical phenomenon made up of individuals, which involves all the ups and downs of what is intrinsically human" (Veloso AND Mill, 2022, p. 17). As Veloso (2022, p. 334) says, it also includes a promise of "recursiveness with a

probability of reproduction within a certain institutionally defined expectation." All of this is done without losing sight of how important legitimacy is for so-called neo-institutionalist theories, since the process of legitimation makes sure that a certain activity will continue in the organization (Machado-da-Silva, Fonseca and Crubellate, 2005). Contradictions drive the process of institutionalization, which operates on a continuum. It also needs to solidify practices and make sure that there are ways to resist the constant instability inside and outside the organization. The aim is to generate pressure on individuals, considering that universities are, in our view, agglomerations of subjects who act reciprocally (Weber, 2015; 2016). By legitimizing itself, this pressure makes individuals subject to the internal order, which makes it possible for practices to materialize in this way rather than that, leading to recursion.

We have already looked at how the UAB System sets up and maintains contradictions in the process of institutionalization (Veloso and Mill, 2022). This is especially true for public distance education, where the UAB System has made important contributions to the mode in Brazil. There are a few examples of this: a promotion policy that is not included in the budget matrix, which creates institutional duality (Barrera, 2018); tutors who play a big role in teaching and learning but have very unstable jobs (Lapa and Pretto, 2017; Chaquime and Areÿo, 2018); different conditions for students who learn online and those who learn in person at the same university; and the "model established by public promotion policy in contrast to attempts at institutional adaptation — are they UAB courses or university courses?" (Veloso and Mill, 2022, p. 12), etc. There are disagreements because of these opposing factors, which show that distance learning and face-to-face learning are sometimes seen as rivals who need to fight for resources, students, and institutional control, among other things. Dialectics is a way of thinking about ideas that help us focus on the bias and opposition that come with the contradictions that, to use a polite term, drive the process.

Once we have thought about the big picture that sets the stage for our analysis, we will use empirical evidence to show some of the problems that still exist in what we also call the "organic incorporation" of distance education. At the end of the day, the movement to overcome the UAB System is a crucial point for thinking about an effective institutionalization of the modality, overcoming scenarios of duality and antagonisms that still exist. The two major setbacks identified in our research, analyzed in the subsequent sections, highlight elements that, for the time being, demand attention from researchers and individuals who make and think about distance education in Brazil. It is also important to note that the evaluations we have suggested are connected to Weberian ideas about knowledge because they are based on two main ideas: universities are seen as groups of people who interact with each other; and any outside or inside influences and stimuli are only real after they are interpreted by the agents, who then give their socially motivated actions a subjective meaning.

THE OPEN UNIVERSITY SYSTEM OF BRAZIL SERVES AS A SYNONYM FOR PUBLIC DISTANCE EDUCATION

We said in Veloso and Mill (2022) that, for public universities to fully use distance education, they need to break away from the model set by the UAB System. This would allow universities to be autonomous and adapt to the needs of the region without sacrificing the quality of the courses or the working conditions, as long as they stay within the limits of the neoliberal capitalist mode of production. We must clarify that our research does not support a rejection of the UAB system without the necessary material conditions. Nor do we ignore the importance of this system as the driving force behind many of the mobilizations that began as the first struggles toward institutionalization. In other words, we believe that this system has created a model of distance education responsible for instilling in agents the conditions and specificities not only of course proposals within this external

funding. People who are part of the institutional routine have been introduced to a form of distance education that is not seen as a specific, unstable, or volatile model. Instead, people perceive it as the most fundamental and essential form of distance education.

We are going to support our argument so that readers can be clear about our proposition. The UAB System emerged as a policy to promote and encourage public distance education. It creates the material conditions that are essential for the start of many of the mobilization processes at the heart of the institutional routine. Not only does it provide funding for the construction of the necessary physical and technological infrastructure, but it also facilitates the hiring of teachers, encourages universities to offer distance education, provides people with valuable and insightful experiences that aid in developing a critical view of the method, establishes a framework that leads to quality standards and governing acts, and so on. Even though the UAB System was still the main (or only) way for some universities to pay for the most difficult distance learning courses (degrees and specializations), people slowly started to see it as something that had to happen to do distance learning instead of seeing it as an example.

In other words, we went from seeing it as a specific, external program aimed at encouraging the proliferation of public distance learning courses to understanding it as DE in its full form. If we agree that institutionalization is a two-way process that depends on how people understand macro and microstructures, then this shift from seeing things as they are to understanding the modality in its abstract form — which everyone has to do — is a critical issue. The empirical evidence that supports our proposition was obtained in different interviews, such as some that we will mention later when dealing with the institutionalization of precariousness. However, Manager D's[1] words, which come from working both in the DE management unit at his institution and at the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES) to evaluate proposals for the UAB, back up what we said very clearly.

> It's just that the UAB *got mixed up with distance education; it... it acted as if it were a... a superimposed thing as if the UAB were distance education.* So, in reality, UAB is a small—a big—project, but it's distance education. Other aspects of distance education were confused within the universities and were completely crushed, with no chance of succeeding, because the entire workforce went to the UAB. (Manager D)

The standardizations that, in a way, have plastered and are plastering distance learning courses also have to do with the macro guidelines themselves and the legislation in force, which compel institutions to go in the same direction. We can support this idea with institutional theory, specifically the ideas of DiMaggio and Powell (2005), because isomorphism is linked to forces that force people to do things, like the government. This means that the distance education model in public institutions, which is inseparable from UAB, is not just subjective and interpreted by individuals. It is obvious that there is a whole set of laws, guidelines, references, etc., that externally determine the configuration of the modality — in fact, all this legislation ended up being influenced by the concept of distance education that emerged at the same time as the first UAB proposals were formatted. According to Weberian's epistemological matrix, our theoretical and analytical work tries to match up with studies that look at how these big and small rules, as well as the material conditions themselves, affect how people understand them and what they do as a result.

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1   The names of the interviewees have been replaced by the profile (teachers, tutors, managers, or students) followed by a letter representing the order in which the interviews were conducted. This is to maintain the confidentiality of the participants.

Well, we say that all of these factors that come from a public policy made in a certain historical and social setting have led to a broad understanding of what distance education is. Therefore, we think that much of the criticism is not directed at the modality's clear ideas and experiences, but at how it is viewed concerning the UAB model, which is wrongly considered universal and necessary. Currently, with all the scientific production already published on distance education, there is still resistance to the idea that distance learning courses simply do not have quality, or even that there is no way to seriously train any subject in teaching-learning proposals whose actors in the process are separated in time and/or space (Saviani, 2020). Disbelief in universities' capacity for inclusion, democratization, and educational and economic change can also contribute to prejudice (Araújo and Freitas, 2013). In any case, when we talk about distance education without a definition or delimitation, we are encompassing a whole multiplicity of courses, proposals, experiences, and formats, among others, which cloud any kind of more assertive judgment. Our research supports this point of view. The only time bias not talked about was in an interview[2] with a permanent university professor or manager. In all the other interviews and data collected, it was always about the professionals who were against distance learning and their lack of experience with it.

In this sense, one piece of empirical evidence from our analysis concerns the teachers' conception of the modality. When questioning teachers who have contact with or at least know about distance learning proposals within their institution, their vision of distance learning will certainly be linked, at some level, to the UAB model.[3] This is even more important for professionals who are less familiar with the modality and who are key figures in resistance movements within many institutions' dialectical development process. We conjecture that these subjects, as they are more removed from the material and concrete reality which gives rise to the vision they assume as synonymous with distance education, ultimately understand the problems that are more specific to the UAB system — i.e. the precarious work of tutors, teaching in distance learning courses on a grant and with responsibilities beyond those dedicated to the exclusive dedication regime, the non-linking of resources to the budget matrix, etc. — from a highly perverse angle, as public distance education per se, and not as a specific model established by a government promotion policy rather than by the State. We cannot ignore the fact that many of the problems related to the modality go beyond public institutions and, in general, extend to the very characteristics of distance education in its historical development, as well as the most current conditions of work in capitalism. In any case, thinking of UAB-funded public distance learning courses as something that everyone needs instead of something real and concrete makes it less likely that people will work hard to change the unstable model that is based on outside funding.

We are going to consider the struggles that occur during discussions in university councils. The subjects' interpretation of material reality always influences the dialectical process of institutionalization, which deals with movements for and against distance education. If, in the case of the typical movements of resistance to distance learning courses, the modality is conceived solely and exclusively based on the UAB model, in other words, as synonymous with this promotion policy,

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2 Teacher-trainer/applicator C mentioned that, although they are a minority at his institution, some teachers have either worked or currently work in the UAB system and still have objections to the modality. Additionally, Manager C stated in the questionnaire that prejudice between teachers involved in distance education and those in face-to-face education is significant. However, during the interview, it was noted that this issue primarily stems from a specific incident at the institution related to problems with managing resources for the modality.

3 This conception of the UAB model as synonymous with public distance education is so significant that the researcher himself has always taken this system as his analytical bias. Undoubtedly, it serves as the primary strategy for advancing the modality. However, in all the data collection instruments, discussions about distance learning courses, directly or indirectly, have always been based on the structure and model established by the UAB System.

it becomes extremely hard to defend the quality of the courses when, in the interpretation that individuals make, they inherently represent a model in which the tutors are not employed and are external to the institution, in which the teachers have to combine their duties in the distance modality with all the exhausting workload of face-to-face education, in which the use and maintenance of face-to-face support centers in the municipalities is a sine qua non — although these centers depend on partnerships with state and municipal governments, which is beyond the control of the institution itself — among others.

Although the UAB System serves as a real-life example, people's perceptions of distance education are not based on this reality. This can make the struggles that drive institutionalization less motivated. The impossibility of perceiving distance learning courses beyond a fixed format makes any form of argument difficult. This means that the mode of delivery is affected when it gets enmeshed in fights that are naturally more intense and complicated. This is because the mode of delivery depends on stronger proposals and a deeper integration into the institutional bureaucracy. Distance education ends up being seen as an idealization with all of its features, which, while coming from the material and concrete reality shown by the UAB System, is separate from this outside promotion and becomes broadly connected to the mode. We have recourse to the words of one of the interviewees to clarify this analysis.

> Today, our model serves as a guide. Therefore, the distance learning courses are not affiliated with *** [name of institution][4], but rather, they are affiliated with UAB. Are we making this distinction internally? Externally, the student thinks that the distance learning course is from *** [name of institution]. Indeed, I am conducting distance administration from *** [name of institution], not from UAB or CAPES. The managers at *** [name of institution], on the other hand, think that distance learning courses are run by CAPES, so much so that they always come to me with any decision made by the course's college or department. Since I do... what is my role within the university, within the UAB? It's managing grants, telling them who can and can't receive them. Academic management, registration, control, and diplomas are all the responsibility of the university. But there's this difficulty because... first, in our case, they're afraid to take any action, right? So people have difficulty taking responsibility and a lack of knowledge. Though fear is a major factor in our case, I think the same discourse will apply in other universities. Our courses have a strong connection with CAPES due to the institutionalization and recognition of distance education. (Manager C)

Also in the interview, this same manager spoke about the care that universities have taken not to confuse emergency remote teaching with distance learning. This concern encompasses a wide range of factors, including the intricacy of planning and preparing undergraduate and specialty courses remotely, a challenge that emergency teaching during pandemics has reportedly avoided. However, we believe that the idealization of public distance education also plays a role in this. To illustrate what we are saying, the UAB model has plastered institutional practices to the point of creating a perception among teachers that distance learning courses must necessarily include tutoring and attendance at face-to-face support centers. Any deviation from this is a variant, such as remote teaching, and not distance education as such. We will not discuss the need or importance of this format in these pages because this public policy began when the modality was still in its infancy and there was a lot of uncertainty about the profile of the teachers and other professionals who were the UAB System's target audience.

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4   To maintain confidentiality, the names of institutions and any other data that might identify the participants were omitted.

Despite this, we cannot ignore the fact that, more than ten years later, the same model is still in place, with a few changes that do not affect the overall structure. On the other hand, it is indisputable that the technologies and those involved in the sport have changed markedly in recent years. What would be the most plausible justification for maintaining a model adopted in 2006, even if the historical and social reality today is very different? Is this format so appropriate and aligned with Brazil's needs that it does not require revision? An unrealistic view of distance education may have grown in universities, the Brazilian experience, and current laws, rules, and guidelines. This unrealistic view keeps people from connecting with real life and stopping larger movements that want to change certain aspects of the mode of education. With the data from our research, we assume that this last question is more in line with empirical reality. In the words of another interviewee, we can also establish this analysis:

> You know what? The institutional distance learning undergraduate course does not require tutors, as it lacks UAB funding. *Initially, the teachers expressed a strong desire for tutors, leading to the formation of a committee to solicit them. I even asked to read it yesterday. So, it's likely to be released at some point, but the same teachers who handled this call yesterday said, "Oh, I don't want a tutor anymore."* Why? Because they are closer to the student, they make that material thinking about that class they know well, right? We know. Furthermore, the student's feedback differs from that of the teacher. Because they say, "I've got *feedback* from a teacher who wrote the material for me." [...] So, in reality, the teacher acts as a teacher, as a tutor, and often as a welcoming person—a friend, you know. But, of course, other subjects are dense; for example, there's a lot of writing, which requires a tutor. They were even talking yesterday about the figure of a subject monitor, right? And at UAB, the tutors work very closely with us. And they've been the same since the beginning of the course. But since there are more students, we currently have [...] There are currently 353 active students at the UAB, while the institutional [distance learning course] has 239 active students, correct? Do you think this movement started because it's harder than face-to-face work? They wanted a tutor, right, so much so that they set up this committee. *But now they're rethinking whether they want a tutor, as is the case with the UAB, or more of a monitor, you know, who helps out at certain times, and that's something that's being discussed too, right? And so, it's being thought about very carefully, right*? (teacher trainer/applicator M)

Initially, the institutional distance learning undergraduate course assumed the need for tutoring, even without UAB funding. However, during the development of the first courses, the teachers began to rethink this need, considering the main benefits of working more closely with students without the intermediary of a tutor. In addition, in denser subjects, where there is a need to divide up the work, they began to think about other formats, such as tutoring. Breaking down a common idea about distance learning is exactly what our analysis of this experience is all about. By combining seemingly contradictory ideas, we can find UAB model-compatible solutions and suggest better university practices. In other words, the teacher's initial endeavor started with their idea of distance education, since no subject acts without a conceptual basis to make the action viable. Thus, to overcome the problems that are specific to a public promotion policy, experience has shown the need to revise some elements and overcome others. We understand that this essentially dialectical process involves precisely overcoming the UAB model. As Engels (2015) states, dialectics encompasses a constant process of coming and going, of that which becomes and passes away in the historical process. So, getting past an idealization of distance learning involves institutionalization, which includes debates, contradictions, getting past, progress, and regression, among other things.

However, we must emphasize that the UAB System's contribution to the idealization of distance education extends beyond a subjective interference. As we have said, institutionalization is a phenomenon that depends on the historical and social reality. At a certain time and place, the main public policy that supported distance learning courses in universities came about because of the desire to create an open university based on European ideas (Costa and Pimentel, 2009; Costa, 2012). We should also include the Brazilian experiences before the UAB System, which certainly contributed to shaping a specific model. Therefore, the emergence of this policy coincided with legal changes that simultaneously shaped and structured distance education in Brazil. In this sense, the UAB ends up generating a series of coercive pressures, either directly or indirectly.

For instance, in the interviews, Manager B said that, even though the school followed the Canadian model, face-to-face centers would not be needed for most courses. However, the university stuck to its main policy of promoting distance education as a way to get the resources it needed, so face-to-face centers and even printed materials were available for the first experiences. On the other hand, Manager C holds the belief that the significant advancements in digital technologies and pedagogical possibilities have rendered face-to-face centers questionable and, in many courses, entirely unnecessary. According to Manager D, the UAB system's model of hubs needs to be revised, and the structure of federal institutes and universities, which today cover the countryside, could be exploited. This would be made possible by a network approach, which considers the importance of physical spaces for face-to-face moments but is also capable of revising the model established by the current public policy for promoting distance education. In short, these are different understandings of reality that converge on the same evidence, which is that the UAB System has created a model that needs to be rethought, but some obstacles hinder this process. We believe that these obstacles stem from the perception of the modality as synonymous with a specific policy. This is a view that does not take into account the essentially dialectical dynamic of institutionalization and the consequent organic incorporation of distance learning courses.

THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF PRECARIOUSNESS

The UAB system encounters problems due to the confusion regarding it *as the* public form of distance education and distance education itself. This can even make the teachers who work in this mode of education think that distance education and the UAB system are synonymous. Here, we propose the aforementioned concept of the institutionalization of precariousness. It is well known that the focus of this article is precisely the process of incorporating distance learning courses into the institutional routine. However, based on the theoretical framework and initial hypotheses of our studies, we thought institutionalization would not need to be dependent on the UAB System. Once more, this policy seems to be an unavoidable part of how we always talk about public distance education. Through research and observation, it has been seen that it is difficult to say for sure what steps need to be taken in all situations to help distance learning courses become more naturally integrated into institutions. This is due to the diverse experiences and realities that shape them. The process itself, which is eminently human and includes the subjects' interpretation of structures, symbols, meanings, etc., does not always have predefined paths. Of course, some regularities allow us to propose important generalizations when analyzing the phenomenon. We recognize that institutionalization is a human process and approaches non-experimental or exact scientific assumptions.

We view the integration of the modality into the institutional routine as a continuous process that requires constant renewal and assurance of legitimacy. This assertion has already been highlighted and has to do with the recursive approach presented by Machado-da-Silva, Fonseca, and Crubellate (2005), but it also relates to our Weberian epistemological matrix. Thus, we can

talk about institutionalizing current conditions when agents consider them legitimate, even without an organic incorporation of the modality. At the moment, there is a whole system of bureaucracy that, in some ways and at different levels, makes distance education objective, which means that it can be repeated without the problems that come with subjectivity. In addition, there is a certain recurrence[5] in the offer, even if this regularity[6] can be more unstable than in face-to-face education. The capacity of institutionalization to reproduce itself also reflects its dialectical nature. This, in turn, has to do with bureaucracy, permanence in maintaining funding, perception of quality, legitimacy, etc. Given these considerations, we believe it is plausible to talk about the institutionalization of precariousness as a phenomenon that permeates public institutions. We turned to the interviewees to affirm our hypothesis:

> No, I don't... I don't think it's that bad [taking on EaD duties in addition to the 40 hours dedicated to other activities at the university]. I think it's possible. I think it should be included because what also happens is that the subjects aren't... how can I put it? For instance, in a classroom setting, you may teach a course that requires two meetings, and you may also work extensively from a distance. Additionally, all student support is conducted directly with students, particularly through chats. But I don't think it gets in the way. You can work at the UAB; you can work... I don't have a problem myself. *I wouldn't even consider filling my CDS [Weekly Teaching Load] with a distance education timetable unless the institution approved it,* which would require a change in the university's regulations. And we haven't yet... we're not even able to do that now [...]. Yes, it's completely [*institutionalized*]. Distance education has become a part of the university's institutional framework. It just doesn't have a seat on the councils because it has to change the statute [...] But *it's institutionalized—it's totally institutionalized*. The coordinator [distance learning management unit], it's... it's functional, it's linked to the rector's office, so it's all... it's ready, and there's no way of taking it away. (teacher-trainer/applicator C)

> Yes... it's... what we're saying is that this UAB model is a model that was institutionalized by the country, right, that was initially adopted by the country to work with distance education, right? It was an initial way of working with distance education in public higher education institutions (HEIs). However, not all HEIs adopted this approach, and it became evident to us that a change was necessary. And what would that change look like? It has... for a few years now, we've been trying to bring them into line with educational institutes [Federal Institutes], because... the institutes, they already receive the funds from the head office. Unlike what happens with universities, right [...] So it's this... it's... this question of institutionalization. When we think that distance education started as a government policy and not a State policy, this government policy has been maintained, and lately, it's been

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5   By recurrence, we don't mean the possibility of offering courses every semester, every year, or in any other well-defined period, as in face-to-face education. This is especially true for UAB-dependent courses, where the availability of courses is often unpredictable. In any case, most of the time there are plans to open new classes, and the distance learning courses funded by this promotion policy are not, in general, a single offer. There have been several classes over the years. Concerning regularity, we are, at least here, understanding the ability to reproduce that has been kept up throughout the UAB's history, even if this reproduction is always surrounded by the unknowns and instability that come with government policy and, in the end, are part of a risky and unstable neoliberalism. This regularity is important because it generates certain perceptions in the subjects that influence their social action.

6   If we take the analysis of regularity and stability to its extreme, the very existence of universities in their current form is uncertain, especially in the face of neoliberalism based on flexibility, structural unemployment, and the dissolution of the state, among others. Certain levels of stability affect how subjects represent material reality. But no policy, even a state policy, can be considered sufficiently stable that it can no longer be dissolved. We want to say that, at least for us, regularity is not the only indicator of an effective institutionalization.

very... difficult for us to have a very drastic change of government, so we started to wonder: will it continue or not? This uncertainty stems from the fact that distance education is a government policy. Therefore, from our perspective as universities, the institutionalization of distance learning was not a wise decision, as it was a government policy rather than a state policy. And we're still trying to break away from that. A... I think it's still very difficult, but we've been trying to break down this barrier, to turn distance education into a real state policy, a university policy, and not just a government policy. (Manager A)

I don't think so... today for us it doesn't interfere [the workload in distance learning not being considered as part of the weekly teaching workload], because as I said, here it's... it's very... it's... it's voluntary, like this. You participate voluntarily, even though there is currently a selection process in place. But we only take part in distance learning if we're interested and want to. So it's... and it's optional, right? So if you wish to take your face-to-face classes, no problem. You'll have a workload of 40 hours or 20 hours, whatever, and that's it—you've fulfilled your schedule there. We'd have a problem if we counted distance learning as part of the teacher's minimum official workload. All of these newer universities have made a very tight calculation of teaching hours to define the number of teachers, so we'd have a deficit. You can't reduce your minimum face-to-face workload because you're in distance learning, but you can expand it. Not then [...] Now, of course, some universities might consider it, because it's also a lot about autonomy [...]. (teacher-trainer/applicator F)[7]

Distance education is [institutionalized]... it's part of the PDI, it's part of the institution's Political Pedagogical Project, it's... it's all been approved by the collegiate bodies, in short... what I'm saying is that it's not even institutionalized, it's... the fact that it's not an initiative of the university, right... the university is part of the initiative of another... of another entity, which is the [*Consórcio de Educação Superior a Distância do Estado do Rio de Janeiro*] CEDERJ; this makes it very difficult for the institution to be more engaged in distance learning processes [...] So, there's a lack of engagement. *Because institutionally, everything has been resolved*. We have no problems—we have all the legal tools to engage teachers." Right? What we don't have are the policies developed for this. The program itself, *** [name of program], just to give you a very clear example: in the last version, there were grants left over. They were grants that came from [Brazil's National Council for Scientific and Technological Development] CNPq's scientific initiation grant quota. You know that these grants are the result of an intense dispute within the university. The previous rector managed to link part of these grants to the *** program. And even so... colleagues knowing that there was a grant... there was still a grant left over. (teacher-trainer/applicator L)

It wasn't easy [the process of incorporating the modality into the institutional routine]; that's why I say *it's totally institutionalized*, because we abolished the word "distance education" [from the regulations]; it [the modality] became the

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7   This professor believes that distance education is in the process of being institutionalized. For him, the essential point would be greater support for the modality, through more incentive and inducement policies, such as calls for research grants for distance learning students, greater inclusion in postgraduate courses, etc. Also, it is important to note that the person being interviewed thinks that the courses are still being institutionalized. It does not bother him that the teaching effort has not been integrated into the institutional bureaucracy, and it does not bother him that distance education was not included in the budget matrix, at least during the interview, as a key way to make it part of the institutional routine.

same [as face-to-face]; it's teaching. The university treats it as teaching. It's simply teaching. That's why it's *fully institutionalized*. Oh, and another thing, the students' diplomas don't have the word... "distance learning." The diploma says 'degree in Languages'; it doesn't say 'degree in Languages at a distance.' There is no such thing. So the diploma is unique for both face-to-face and distance learning students [...] That's why I say *it's totally institutionalized*. It was a war, but we succeeded. (Manager B)

No, here they're already used to it [accumulating the functions of distance education and the in-person workload]. As a result of this longstanding practice, teachers have developed a culture of not worrying about teaching distance learning courses and registering them with the department. Because the subject gets registered without a workload, right? It's necessary for them to formalize it, as the subject must be included in the department. The subject belongs to the department. But then the course load is zeroed out. This has been happening for long, so it's never been an obstacle. Yes, sometimes there may be a few inquiries, but I always get the standard answer [that it's advisable not to record EaD hours in the Weekly Teaching Workload, as teachers receive a UAB grant for working in this modality], and they've never sought more information about this. And there's no point in asking CAPES, because they will always say this is a decision to be made by the institution. (Manager C)

[...] Today we had a meeting with a representative of CAPES, and we understood that distance education was not yet effectively institutionalized at *** [name of institution], but other institutions with only one unit for implementing the UAB consider themselves to be institutionalized. (teacher-trainer/applicator I)

The statements from the interviewees contain a wealth of crucial information that requires clarification. First, how people think about distance education, especially under the UAB model, can change depending on the school and subject. This can lead to a synonym for the method and the realization that there is a beneficial crystallization today. One might object, saying that indicators would show that there is not, in fact, this organic incorporation, not least because the costing itself is not, as a rule, included in the budget matrix. In any case, the subjects' feelings about institutionalized distance education are crucial when we look at the data from a Weberian point of view to see how people give subjective meaning to social action. We only need to refer back to our definition that argues for the process of institutionalization as a dialectical phenomenon, closely linked to the struggles at the core of universities. There are two main effects of accepting the way things are now with distance education. First, it tries to institutionalize the program by getting past the current ideas and the UAB model that are blocking the way. Second, accepting the way things are now might bother some people, but it might not make them unhappy enough to join the institutional struggle that is needed for distance education to naturally become part of school life. Therefore, we assert that the UAB model's perception of precariousness has led to the institutionalization of this phenomenon. As previously mentioned, this model becomes, at a certain point, the modality, representing an idealization that depicts distance education with its supposedly universal and essential characteristics.

People may think that distance learning courses need outside funding and are similar to other institutions in the way they do things, which can lead to this trend in terms of fitting in with the times. Again, due to its parallel nature, one can objectively view distance learning as a separate entity from the institution. From this, there would be evidence of a delay in the

institutionalization of the modality. However, our research takes a different view of this process by focusing on interpretation as the main analytical point. As a result, we give social action a subjective meaning. Some signs show people may be partially or fully dependent on the UAB system, but how the subjects see the real world is what matters when it comes to the progress (or lack thereof) of institutionalizing the modality.

Since the model of a government policy seems to force teachers to become used to being in a precarious situation, this can lead to counterproductive conformity or even the need to get over the bias that comes from thinking that distance education is always precarious. In addition, there is the dichotomous view that places distance and face-to-face modalities in a constant struggle to maintain or redirect scarce resources. The contrast still exists even when funding is guaranteed by the UAB system; that is when the budget matrix's limited resources are not needed. It just takes on a different form. In such situations, the institutional bureaucracy not only opposes distance education within the institution but also frequently rejects it. For example, the hours worked in the distance mode are not taken into account when judging professional performance for career advancement or when hiring teachers as part of the weekly workload.

Having said that, we stress that institutionalization is, for us, a phenomenon strictly linked to recursion. In addition, the main thing that makes up distance learning work at universities is a human process that depends on people taking part in institutional debates. Individuals intrinsically experience this phenomenon, which also links to material and concrete reality within a defined historical and social context. It depends on the institution's history and participants throughout its development. To agree with Weber (2015; 2016), people are still the building blocks of universities because institutional practices are shaped by social action. This means that how people understand micro and macrostructures must be taken into account when analyzing them.

The institutional bureaucracy and the concept of distance education as an object serve to facilitate and simplify the process of replicating institutional practices. Ferreira and Carneiro (2015) propose indicators that closely relate to perenniality. This is because, even if people can fight for distance education, those fights are usually pointless. After all, they do not involve physical resources or basic materiality. But the contribution of our analysis is to show that the opposite is also true. Therefore, even when all conditions are satisfied, the survival of an institutional practice hinges on the subject's perspective on reality and their actions. Certain material conditions offer greater guarantees of reproduction with less possibility of interference. However, because it is a dialectical process and, consequently, a human one, the institutionalization of distance education has to do with legitimation. In a strict sense, no institutional practice is strong enough that it cannot lose its legitimacy at any given time and in any given historical and social context. It can, therefore, go through contradictory movements that end in deinstitutionalization. In other words, any institutional practice, although it is guaranteed by various pillars, can be considered illegitimate in a given context so that it can be purged from the institutional routine.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The institutionalization of distance education is indeed a complex phenomenon. In this article, we have not ignored the multifaceted approaches that research in the area proposes to study. In any case, our investigation is based on a Weberian epistemological approach, focusing on the subjective meaning attributed to social action. As a result, we understand public universities (state and federal) as agglomerations of subjects that act reciprocally. We also use dialectics as a way to think about ideas because it helps us focus on the contradictions that are always present and drives the process of coming up with new ideas that come from institutional conflicts and struggles. As an inherently human phenomenon, institutionalization is, as we have already stated, a continuum that does not

have an inexorable sequentiality, nor does it end at an advanced level of crystallization of practices. Legitimacy, a fundamental element, requires constant renewal and assurance. This lets people give in to the pressure of the system and keeps things going this way instead of that.

The above, therefore, gives us the basis for investigating some of the obstacles that have so far stood in the way of what we call the organic incorporation of distance education. First, empirical data reveals that many universities perceive the UAB system as synonymous with public distance learning courses. This makes it difficult, by way of example, to envision other possible configurations for the modality that go beyond a historically and socially delimited model imposed by an emergency policy. Consequently, this peculiar way of interpreting concrete reality leads to what we call the institutionalization of precariousness. This is a phenomenon whose interpretation of material conditions makes it legitimate, cooling the institutional clashes and struggles that are the driving force behind the process. Confirming the current order allows subjects to adapt and avoid fundamental arguments that stall the institutionalization of distance education.

Now, we know that the object of study is intricate when it is capable of bringing together subjective and material specificities. Furthermore, thinking about overcoming the UAB system is complex, as it does not have to do only with a rationally oriented attitude. In many universities, discontinuity of the current promotion policy has certainly led to the dissolution of distance education proposals. Further studies on the subject, particularly those focusing on specific cases, are necessary to understand the unique characteristics of each institutional reality. Given the complexity intrinsic to the phenomenon of institutionalization, the generalizations we make are, of course, limited. We need to look closely at universities' pasts, presents, and unique features to come up with ideas and plans that can help fight the institutionalization of precariousness and, by extension, the UAB System so that distance education can be effectively integrated into the school system.

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