


## TRAINING OF EDUCATORS FOR SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION IN THE COUNTRYSIDE: EXPERIENCE OF THE DEGREE IN RURAL EDUCATION/DISTANCE EDUCATION AT UFSM

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### ABSTRACT

This experience report addresses the Degree Course in Rural Education, offered by the Federal University of Santa Maria (UFSM) in the distance modality (EaD), with the objective of training educators to work in rural communities. The course serves family farmers, young people and adults, who face difficulties in accessing face-to-face higher education due to responsibilities in the field. With face-to-face support centers in 19 municipalities in Rio Grande do Sul, the training promotes social inclusion and local development, articulating teaching, research and extension with a focus on Agroecology.

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Between 2023 and 2024, a qualitative survey with 98 freshmen (61% of those enrolled) revealed that 64% of students are women, aged between 29 and 38 years, many already with specialization. The course offers flexibility to reconcile work, studies and family life, using the Moodle Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) as a central tool. The results indicate that the course contributes to the transformation of rural communities, forming critical and committed educators. However, the dropout rate of 52.2% points to the need for strategies that strengthen academic retention and success. Knowledge of the profile of freshmen is essential to adjust training to their expectations and the demands of the communities, promoting a contextualized and emancipatory rural education.

**Keywords:** Distance Education. Agricultural Sciences. Interiorization of Education. Freshman Profile.

## INTRODUCTION

Rural Education was created to meet a historical demand of rural populations, who face significant challenges in relation to access to quality education. These populations, many of which are composed of family farmers, traditionally fight for an education that respects their particularities, including the way of living and producing within the reality of family farming. According to Silva and Ferreira (2020), education in the countryside should be conceived from the understanding of the rural context, recognizing its cultural, social, and economic specificities. This is critical to ensure that rural communities can take ownership of the educational process and thus promote transformations in their own context.

Unfortunately, many family farmers are unable to complete their studies, as they are prevented from accessing higher education outside their territories due to the workload in family farm units, which requires a large part of their time. According to Torres (2019), the lack of access to universities and academic training centers in rural areas is one of the biggest obstacles to higher education in Brazil, especially for those who have daily agricultural obligations. This scenario led to the creation of the Degree Course in Rural Education at the Federal University of Santa Maria (UFSM), in the distance modality (EaD). The course, lasting four years and with a workload of 3,285 hours, was designed to serve young people, adults and family farmers who seek higher education without having to travel to large urban centers.

The distance education modality in Brazil has been widely supported by the Open University System of Brazil (UAB), which aims to expand access to higher education in more remote regions, encouraging local and regional development. The UAB, as Costa (2018) points out, has contributed to the democratization of higher education in Brazil, allowing geographically dispersed populations, such as those residing in rural areas, to have the opportunity to access higher education without leaving their territories. The implementation of face-to-face support centers, in which face-to-face academic activities are carried out, is an essential element for the success of distance education, allowing students to closely monitor their academic activities, even in more distant regions.

The Degree Course in Rural Education at UFSM aims to train educators capable of understanding and acting on historical, social, political and cultural issues involving Rural Education. In addition, it seeks to foster the implementation of new methodologies, especially those based on the concept of Agroecology, which relate pedagogical practices

to the reality of family farming. According to Freire (1996), education should be an instrument of social transformation, capable of providing rural subjects with the conditions to become agents of change in their communities. In this sense, the course aims to train professionals to work in Basic Education, especially in the final years of Elementary School (History and Geography) and High School (History, Geography, Philosophy and Sociology), with a focus on the Rural School, in addition to working on the management of educational processes both in schools and in local communities.

The course proposal, created by professors from the Department of Agricultural Education and Rural Extension (DEAExR) at UFSM in 2017, has already graduated two classes in 2020 and 2022 and has others in progress, with new entries scheduled for 2025 and 2026. With face-to-face support centers in 19 municipalities in Rio Grande do Sul, the course seeks to promote social inclusion and local development through the articulation of teaching, research and extension, which directly involve communities and their needs. The locations served by the course include municipalities such as Agudo, Camargo, Canguçu, Encantado, Imbé, Itaqui, Novo Hamburgo, Panambi, Piratini, among others.

This experience report aims to share the results of a survey carried out between 2023 and 2024, which sought to understand the profile of freshmen in the Teaching Degree in Rural Education, as well as the reasons that led these students to choose this training. The qualitative research had the participation of 98 freshmen, representing 61% of the enrolled students. Most participants were female (64%) and between 29 and 38 years old, with many already having a level of specialization. These data are consistent with the trends observed in the distance education scenario in Brazil, where women represent the majority of students (ABED Census, 2016/2017).

The flexibility offered by distance learning, especially through the Moodle Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), was highlighted as an effective tool to reconcile work, studies and family life. However, the dropout rate of 52.2% points to the need to develop more effective pedagogical strategies to ensure the permanence and academic success of students, aligning the objectives of the course with the expectations and realities of the freshmen. By knowing the profile of the students and their motivations, it is possible to improve teaching strategies, strengthening the training of critical educators, committed to their communities and able to promote significant changes in the field, as recommended by Freire (1996).

## METHODOLOGY

The present qualitative research was carried out in 2023 and 2024, covering the 19 face-to-face support centers that serve the Degree in Rural Education at the Federal University of Santa Maria (UFSM). The course, in the distance modality (EaD), aims to offer training for educators to work in rural communities and peripheral areas, and the research sought to analyze the profile of the freshmen, as well as to identify the motivations that led them to opt for this training. The target audience was formed by students entering the course, who represented a significant sample of individuals from different rural regions of the state of Rio Grande do Sul, with particularities in access to education and living conditions.

For data collection, a questionnaire composed of 24 closed questions was used, made available through Google Forms. The choice for this digital tool aimed to ensure greater coverage in data collection, facilitating access for participants and meeting the need for effective communication in a remote teaching context. This methodology is widely recommended for distance education studies, since online data collection provides practicality and flexibility for participants, in addition to being a way of using the tools of the learning environment (Costa and Souza, 2020). The use of digital tools is also in line with the very concept of innovation in education, which aims to integrate technologies into the pedagogical process, in addition to ensuring research with greater reach, meeting the specificities of the rural context and the geographical dispersion of students.

The questionnaire was sent to 160 enrolled students, of whom 98 responded, representing a response rate of 61%. This rate is considered expressive, as it demonstrates good engagement of freshmen, which reinforces the importance of research to understand the characteristics of this audience. The research was characterized as an exploratory study, as the main objective was to understand the profile of the freshmen and the reasons that motivated them to enter the course. As mentioned by Souza and Oliveira (2021), exploratory studies are essential in innovative educational contexts, as they allow for the collection of preliminary information that can guide improvements in the pedagogical process, with a focus on student retention and success.

The analysis of the profile of the freshmen also offers valuable data on the construction of the profile of the graduate. With this, it is possible to improve academic training and adjust it according to the expectations of students and the needs of rural communities. According to Oliveira and Costa (2021), understanding the profile of students

is essential for planning pedagogical strategies that promote permanence and academic success, especially in distance learning courses, where challenges related to dropout and adaptation to the distance format are common.

Another relevant aspect of the research was the use of digital communication tools, which are fundamental in the process of interaction and learning in the distance format. Tools such as Google Forms and other digital resources enable greater proximity between students and the institution, creating a more interactive and collaborative learning environment. Lima et al. (2020) point out that the use of digital technologies facilitates not only data collection, but also promotes the formation of a learning community, allowing students to feel more connected to the course and their peers, even though they are physically distant.

The choice to carry out the survey through an online questionnaire is also a strategy that reflects the very education model of the Degree in Rural Education course. By using digital tools, the survey contributes to the process of internalization of higher education, facilitating the inclusion of students from more distant areas and expanding opportunities for access to quality education. According to the Open University System of Brazil (UAB), the use of information and communication technologies plays a central role in promoting higher education in remote areas and strengthening the interiorization of education, as highlighted by Torres (2019).

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

The Degree in Rural Education at the Federal University of Santa Maria (UFSM) was conceived as a response to the need to overcome the traditional models of Brazilian academic training, especially in the context of rural populations. Offered in the distance modality, this course stands out for its high completion rate, as evidenced by Table 1, which presents the course's indexes since its implementation within the scope of the Open University of Brazil (UAB), between 2006 and 2023.

This modality has demonstrated significant effectiveness in reaching students in remote regions, standing out as a model of inclusive and accessible education. The course seeks to contribute directly to local and regional development, aligning with UFSM's institutional policies of Teaching, Research and Extension, according to the university's Institutional Development Plan (PDI 2016-2026).

Table 1 - Indexes of the Degree Course in Rural Education at the Federal University of Santa Maria within the scope of UAB (years 2006 to 2023).

Variables	Indexes
Number of offers	4
Number of municipalities	19
Dropout rate	52,2 %
Number of students graduated	158
Number of students enrolled	160

Fonte: SIE/UFSM 2023.

The three classes already offered demonstrate how the course is aligned with contemporary educational challenges and UFSM's policies, which prioritize academic excellence, social inclusion, and local and regional development. These are principles defended in the PDI of UFSM, which aims to integrate teaching, research and extension, in addition to fostering innovation in higher education (UFSM, 2016). The course, therefore, not only aims to train educators for rural schools, but also to strengthen the education and development of rural communities, enabling its members to contribute significantly to the social and economic context of the regions in which they live.

The profile of the students of the course reflects the typical characteristics of Distance Education (DE) in Brazil. With 64% of women enrolled, the course follows the trend observed by the Census of the Brazilian Association of Distance Education (ABED), which, in 2016, revealed that the majority of distance education students in Brazil are women (ABED, 2016). This data can be explained by the flexibility that distance education offers, allowing women to balance their professional and family activities with the continuity of their studies. The course, therefore, represents a unique opportunity for these women, many of whom take on important roles in supporting their families and in field activities.

Another relevant aspect is the age group of the freshmen, with 46.7% of students in the 29 to 38 age group, which reflects an audience with previous experience in various areas of knowledge, many of whom already have higher education or postgraduate degrees. This characteristic of the profile of the freshmen points to an audience that, despite already having academic experience, seeks to expand its knowledge, especially in Human Sciences, in the disciplines of History, Geography, Philosophy and Social Sciences. These data are also in line with the trends observed in the literature on adult education, which show an increase in interest in distance education among people who seek continuous qualification, often in search of a new professional direction or to meet the need to improve their pedagogical skills (Moran, 2015).



The course is also differentiated by the fact that it is focused on education in the countryside, where most students reside. Students, in turn, bring their own educational experiences to the virtual classes, derived from their experiences in the field, which represents an interesting challenge for teachers. The relationship between theory and practice becomes fundamental in this context, as teachers need to integrate academic knowledge with the pedagogical practices that students have already experienced in rural daily life.

Distance Education is an effective solution to overcome the difficulty of access to higher education in the most remote regions of Brazil. According to research by Marques (2020), distance education has played a key role in the democratization of higher education, allowing students from rural or peripheral areas to obtain academic training without having to travel to large urban centers.

The choice for UFSM, a public and free university with more than 60 years of tradition, is directly related to the prestige of the institution and the fact that it is a university focused on quality and social inclusion. The fact that UFSM offers a Degree in Rural Education in the distance learning modality, with content and methodology adapted to the needs of rural students, reflects a significant effort to bring higher education to regions that have traditionally been marginalized by the public higher education system.

The choice for the distance learning modality also reflects the specific needs of students. The survey revealed that 31.6% of freshmen opted for distance education because of the flexibility it offers, allowing them to reconcile work and study. According to Pereira (2018), this flexibility is one of the main attractions of distance education, especially for students who, as in the case of the Degree in Rural Education, are inserted in the rural context and often have responsibilities in the field that make it difficult to adhere to face-to-face courses. The use of the Moodle Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), which facilitates the monitoring of activities and access to course content, has also proven to be a positive point, since 79.4% of students said they found it easy to use the platform.

Moodle, used as a teaching platform at UFSM, has been widely praised by the students of the course. The survey revealed that 79.4% of students consider the platform easy to use, and 41.9% evaluate it as good, reflecting the suitability of this tool to the needs of students. The platform is a key piece for the success of distance education, allowing continuous interaction between students and teachers and facilitating access to content in a dynamic and flexible way (Oliveira, 2017).



In addition, the teaching materials, developed especially to meet the Teaching Degree in Rural Education course, were positively evaluated by the majority of students, with 45% classifying them as good. This customization of the teaching material, in line with the characteristics and needs of the target audience, demonstrates UFSM's commitment to the quality of the education offered, even in a distance learning context. With regard to the infrastructure of the face-to-face centers, 48.4% of the students are satisfied, which reinforces the importance of partnerships with the municipalities to ensure the quality of the infrastructure necessary for the good performance of the course.

In short, the Degree in Rural Education at UFSM, offered in the distance learning modality, has proven to be an innovative and effective training model for educators in rural areas. The high enrollment rate, the adherence of women, the flexibility of distance education and the quality of teaching materials are clear indicators that this course has the potential to transform rural communities, promoting social inclusion and local development. The use of technologies such as Moodle and the adaptation of pedagogical content to the needs of students are essential elements to ensure the quality of teaching and the permanence of students in the course. The success of this educational model represents an important contribution to the democratization of higher education in Brazil.

## **CONCLUSION**

The data presented highlight the importance of understanding the profile of those entering the Teaching Degree in Rural Education, with the objective of developing effective strategies that enhance learning and align with the desired profile for the graduate. Knowing the profile of students from the beginning of the course is essential not only to outline teaching methodologies that are more appropriate to their needs, but also to implement actions that favor the permanence of students in the institution, preventing dropout and contributing to the successful completion of the course. Dropout is a constant challenge in higher education institutions, especially in courses offered in the distance modality, as is the case with this course, and understanding the profile of the freshman allows a more effective approach to face this problem.

The Pedagogical Project of the Degree Course (PPC) in Rural Education aims to train a qualified professional in the area of Human Sciences, with theoretical-practical skills that enable him to act as an educator who goes beyond the classroom. The desired graduate must be a distinguished graduate, involved with his community, with the ability to

articulate and implement projects that respond to local needs. This professional must have a deep knowledge of the peculiarities of the rural context, as this understanding is crucial for the construction of their pedagogical skills and for the success of their professional performance. In this sense, aligning the characteristics of the profile of the freshmen with the training objectives of the course is essential to ensure that the training offered is effective and that the student can meet the expectations of their academic and professional development.

The profile of the freshmen, as evidenced by the data, indicates that, although many students already have previous training, many also seek a new qualification in the course that allows them to expand their field of professional activity and their impact on the community. Most students are women and people in older age groups, which reflects a search for flexibility to reconcile study with other responsibilities, such as work and family. This profile requires a careful look from educators for the construction of pedagogical practices that promote the integration of theory and practice effectively. Carrying out activities that connect students with their community context, where they already have an active role, is an effective strategy to strengthen their learning and prepare them for real-world challenges.

Prior knowledge of the particularities of their communities can be a differential in the training of these students, as it facilitates the process of applying the knowledge acquired in the concrete situations of the local reality. For this, it is necessary for the course to maintain a constant dialogue with freshmen, helping them to understand how their training relates to the profile of graduates outlined in the PPC. This alignment is important for students to understand the expectations of the course and feel motivated to achieve the proposed objectives.

The approximation between the training objectives of the course and the individual needs of the students is fundamental for the success of the training, as it contributes to a greater commitment of the students to their learning process and to the application of their knowledge in practice.

In addition, permanence strategies must be constantly evaluated and adjusted based on this understanding of the profile of freshmen. The implementation of pedagogical, psychological, and academic support actions, as well as the promotion of an institutional culture that values inclusion and diversity, are essential to ensure that students feel welcomed and prepared to overcome the challenges of the course. The adaptation of

teaching methodologies and the promotion of spaces for interaction and exchange of experiences between students and professors can be fundamental to ensure a successful academic trajectory.

Thus, understanding the profile of freshmen and their expectations in relation to the Degree in Rural Education course is an important step towards building a curriculum that is not only academic, but also deeply connected to local realities. This connection between theory and practice, between learning and context, has the potential to transform education in the countryside and generate a positive impact both in the lives of students and in the communities where they work. For this process to be successful, it is essential that freshmen are clear about the training they will receive and that they feel aligned with the ideals and objectives of the course, which, in turn, will strengthen their commitment to learning and transforming their reality.

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