


## DISTANCE LEARNING IN BRAZIL: PATH TO DEMOCRACY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE OR EXPANSION OF THE EDUCATIONAL MARKET?

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## **ABSTRACT**

Distance Education (DE) in Brazil has sparked intense debates, sometimes being considered a tool to democratize access to education, and sometimes as a vector for the commercialization of education. The research starts with the following question: Does DE contribute to the promotion of democracy and social justice or is it subordinate to the interests of the educational market in Brazil? Using a qualitative methodology according to Minayo (2016), which involves documentary analysis and a bibliographic review based on Gil (1999), the study investigates statistical data, public policies, and academic studies on the expansion of DE in the country. To theoretically support the reflections, we use the work *Educação contra a barbaridade* (2019), a collection of texts that problematize the directions of contemporary education. The results indicate that DE has played an important role in expanding access to education for marginalized populations and those living in remote regions. However, its expansion, especially in the private sector, has often been guided by market interests. This logic compromises the quality of education, limits access to adequate pedagogical resources, and reinforces preexisting educational inequalities. It is concluded that distance learning has significant potential for social transformation, as long as it is integrated into an educational project committed to equity and social justice. However, when guided exclusively by market logic, this modality perpetuates and even deepens structural inequalities in the Brazilian educational system.

**Keywords:** Distance Learning (EAD). Democratization of Education. Commodification of Education. Social Justice.

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## INTRODUCTION

### DISTANCE LEARNING DILEMMAS IN BRAZIL: INTRODUCTION

Distance learning (EAD) in Brazil presents contemporary dilemmas that reflect the contradictions of the country's educational system. On the one hand, it is praised as a viable alternative for expanding access to education, especially in a scenario marked by social and educational exclusion (Santos, 2019). On the other hand, the expansion of the modality raises questions about its ability to guarantee quality and equity, prompting urgent discussions about its real contribution to the democratization of education or its instrumentalization as a profit-driven market.

In the search for guaranteeing the right to education, the use of EAD is seen as a way to overcome geographical distances that, in some situations, prevent physical access to educational institutions. Thus, the use of distance learning would guarantee the expansion of educational opportunities and the democratization of access to education, with greater reach, greater flexibility for teachers and students, and modernization of educational processes through the use of information and communication technologies (Santos, 2019, p. 193).

Thus, Brazil, with its continental territorial extension, faces unique challenges in the provision of education. Many municipalities and communities in remote regions lack adequate infrastructure, such as schools and qualified professionals, which makes access to in-person education difficult. In this context, distance learning emerges as a promising solution, allowing individuals from geographically isolated locations to have access to knowledge and professional training, minimizing travel barriers and associated costs. However, Santos (2019: 193) asks:

Anísio Teixeira stated that Brazil is a country with an astonishing geography that separates us due to its immense distances. But does the education offered, especially in distance learning, help to overcome the material, social, cultural, economic, and racial gaps that exist in the country or does it simply contribute to widening them?

However, the discourse that praises distance learning as an instrument of inclusion is often appropriated by entrepreneurs in the education sector to justify the expansion of this market. Under neoliberal logic, education is treated as a commodity, resulting in strategies that reduce operating costs, such as the adoption of generic study materials, the devaluation of education professionals, and the precariousness of teaching conditions. This logic compromises the quality of the training offered and perpetuates educational inequality, masked under the argument of accessibility. For Antunes and Pinto:

[...] Neoliberal capitalism has placed pragmatics of fragmented specialization as the horizon for education. An education shaped by technical pragmatics that directs the qualification of work within the limits of the objectification and fragmentation imposed by the work process. The “ideal school” for this qualification promotes the separation between concept, theory, and reflection (intellectual work), on the one hand, and practice, application, and experimentation (manual work), on the other. A school that, in addition, places much more emphasis on practice, application, and experimentation to the detriment of concept, theory, and reflection. We are seeing this situation with the expansion of distance learning (2017: 79).

Thus, the debate on distance learning in Brazil is divided between two poles: on the one hand, the legitimate need of marginalized populations and those living in remote areas who see this modality as an opportunity for social transformation; on the other, the interests of educational companies that prioritize profit over quality and social justice. This clash of perspectives demands a critical and in-depth analysis of the role of distance learning in contemporary Brazilian education.

Thinking about Distance Learning (EAD) in Brazil requires that we think about education itself and its role in society. It also requires remembering education as a fundamental human right and its role in the formation of individuals and the construction of social relations. This implies thinking of education as a possibility for the development of human potential, the appropriation of historically constructed social knowledge, and the acquisition of knowledge that allows us to know, understand, and transform reality (Santos, 2019, p.192).

The question that guides this investigation is: Does Distance Education in Brazil contribute to the promotion of democracy and social justice or is it conditioned by the market interests that dominate the educational scenario? This research is relevant for several reasons: for society, it brings reflections on the quality of education offered and its capacity to promote equity; for universities, it offers subsidies to evaluate their insertion in this market and the social responsibilities inherent to their performance (Santos, et. al., 2024). Finally, it invites managers, educators, and graduates to Public policymakers to think critically about the impact of distance learning, especially about ensuring quality education.

That said, understanding the nuances of distance learning in Brazil is not only a matter of evaluating its effectiveness as a teaching method but also of reflecting on the paths toward an education that transcends market interests, strengthening its role as a fundamental right and a tool for social justice. For Sampaio (2016: 146): “[...] Historically, in Brazil, an education has always been designed to justify and increase inequalities and preserve the positions already conquered by the elites”.

The analysis presented in this article seeks to contribute to a debate essential to Brazilian education, pointing out limits, potentialities, and paths for distance learning to assert itself as a genuine instrument of transformation and inclusion. It is essential, however, to overcome the limited vision that reduces education to a product, rescuing its emancipatory role and forming critical citizenship.

With this approach, the work aims to broaden the understanding of the dynamics and implications of distance learning in Brazil, establishing a bridge between the real needs of students and the practices of the educational market, always with the commitment to think of education as a right and not as a business.

### **PATHS TOWARDS DISTANCE LEARNING IN BRAZIL: A CRITICAL AND COMPREHENSIVE METHODOLOGY FOR ANALYZING THE DILEMMAS BETWEEN INCLUSION AND COMMERCIALIZATION**

The methodology adopted to conduct this research is based on the premise of an in-depth understanding of the dilemmas of Distance Learning (DL) in Brazil, using a qualitative approach to investigate the complex interactions between education, inclusion, and the market. Qualitative research stands out as essential for the object under study, as it allows us to capture the multiple dimensions and contradictions inherent to DL, going beyond a quantitative analysis that would only measure the scope of the modality. Qualitative analysis therefore enables a richer and more detailed interpretation of underlying issues, such as the effectiveness of distance learning in promoting educational equity and the impacts of its commercialization.

Qualitative research answers very specific questions. Within the Social Sciences, it deals with the universe of meanings, motives, aspirations, beliefs, values, and attitudes. This set of human phenomena is understood here as part of social reality since human beings are distinguished not only by acting but also by thinking about what they do and by interpreting their actions within and based on the reality experienced and shared with their peers. The universe of human production that can be summarized in the world of relationships, representations, and intentionality and is the object of qualitative research can hardly be translated into numbers and quantitative indicators (Minayo, 2016, p. 20-21).

Bibliographic research was essential for the development of this investigation, as it provided a theoretical basis for the main debates and theories related to Distance Education, neoliberalism, and educational inequalities. By adopting a comprehensive and contextual analysis, it was possible to review a wide range of academic sources and reports that discuss Distance Education in the Brazilian context, including works by Santos

(2019), Antunes and Pinto (2017), and Sampaio (2016), among others. These authors offer important reflections on the contradictions of education in Brazil, from criticism of neoliberalism to the search for the democratization of education, providing a solid basis for critical analysis and positioning of the study.

Bibliographic research is developed based on previously prepared material, consisting mainly of books and scientific articles. Although almost all studies require some type of work of this nature, there are studies developed exclusively from bibliographic sources. Many exploratory studies can be defined as bibliographical research, as can a certain number of studies developed using the content analysis technique (Gil, 2011, p. 44).

The process of implementing the research began with the emergence of the starting question, which sought to understand whether distance learning contributes to the promotion of democracy and social justice or whether it is subordinate to the market interests that dominate education in Brazil. This question emerged from the observation of tensions between the potential benefits of distance learning for marginalized populations and the appropriation of this modality by educational companies focused on profit, which raised doubts about its real social impact. The guiding question was essential to direct the research objectives, providing a critical and reflective analysis of the role of distance learning in Brazilian society.

To support the investigation, theoretical frameworks were used that help to understand the dilemmas and contradictions of distance learning in Brazil. The work of Santos (2019) was particularly relevant when discussing the promises of distance learning as a tool for inclusion, but also warning about the risks of the commodification of education. Furthermore, the work of Antunes and Pinto (2017) was essential to understanding how neoliberalism transforms education into a market, making teaching conditions precarious and perpetuating inequalities. The combination of these authors allowed for a critical and multifaceted analysis of distance learning, considering both its technical and operational aspects and its social and political impacts.

The bibliographic review was one of the fundamental steps of the research. In addition to consulting the authors cited, articles, books, dissertations, and theses that address distance learning from different perspectives were analyzed. This allowed for a broader view of contemporary debates about the modality in Brazil, including its effectiveness, its limitations, and the challenges it poses to the democratization of education. The analysis of these works allowed us to identify the different approaches to



distance learning, from those who advocate inclusion to those who criticize the instrumentalization of education as a market.

In addition to the bibliographic review, the research was characterized by a comprehensive analysis, which sought to understand the reality of distance learning in Brazil in light of the country's social, economic, and political conditions. The conjunctural analysis was crucial to understanding how distance learning fits into a context of educational inequality and social exclusion, where, on the one hand, it offers possibilities for inclusion, but, on the other, it is used as a marketing strategy that weakens the quality of education. This process involved a critical reading of data on the expansion of distance learning and its implications for citizenship formation and social justice.

The data were collected and analyzed systematically, always seeking a critical look at the sources consulted. The research took place in a phase of intense reading and reflection, where each theory and concept was discussed and confronted with the realities of distance learning in Brazil. This process made it possible to construct a critical interpretation, which was not limited to reproducing the discourses on distance learning but sought to identify the contradictions and challenges that it poses for Brazilian education.

The analysis was also guided by an interpretative methodology, which prioritized the understanding of the social implications of distance learning, rather than the simple evaluation of its technical implementation. This implied a careful reading of the texts, identifying not only the positive and negative aspects of distance learning but also the political and social tensions surrounding its expansion. It was then necessary to reflect on the impacts of distance learning on the construction of democratic education, understanding its potential, but also its limits, as a way of ensuring that it is an effective tool for social transformation.

The research process also involved constant reflection on the data found and its relevance to the central question of the investigation. During the analysis, new questions arose that broadened the understanding of the problem, such as the need to think of distance learning not only as a form of access but as a pedagogical practice that must be carefully planned and monitored to ensure its effectiveness. Thus, the methodology was not limited to data collection, but extended to critical and constant reflection, seeking to relate the findings to broader issues of education in Brazil.

That said, the conclusion of the research aimed to integrate all the information and reflections generated throughout the study, presenting a comprehensive and critical

analysis of the dilemmas of Distance Education in Brazil. The research sought to answer the initial question, reflecting on the possibilities and limitations of Distance Education, and proposing ways for this modality to become, in fact, a tool for the democratization of education, far from the clutches of the educational market. The study highlighted the importance of an education that is concerned with quality and equity, considering Distance Education not only as a technical alternative but as a fundamental human right.

## **DISTANCE EDUCATION: A PATH TO DEMOCRACY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE OR EXPANSION OF THE EDUCATIONAL MARKET?**

Distance Education (EAD) in Brazil has consolidated itself as a growing modality of education, with several enrollments that, according to several newspapers and recent studies, have equaled that of enrollments in the in-person modality. This phenomenon reveals a significant change in the Brazilian educational scenario, reflecting transformations in public policies, pedagogical practices, and the demands of society (Santos, et. al., 2024). Distance Learning (EAD), according to Niskier (1999: 50) is:

[...] planned learning that generally occurs in a different location from the teaching and, because of this, requires special course design techniques, special instructional techniques, special methods of communication through electronics and other technologies, as well as essential organizational and administrative arrangements.

Thus, the growth in enrollments in distance learning can be explained by several factors, including the advancement of information and communication technologies, which make access to knowledge easier and more flexible. The possibility of studying from anywhere and at times adapting to the student's routine has attracted a growing number of people, especially in regions where the supply of in-person education is limited or non-existent. Thus, “[...] in the search for guaranteeing the right to education, the use of distance learning is seen as a way to overcome geographical distances that, in some situations, prevent physical access to educational institutions” (Santos, 2019, p. 191). This model, therefore, represents a viable alternative for expanding access to education in a country with continental dimensions and with great inequality in access to educational institutions.

The number of enrollments in higher education in the distance learning modality in Brazil is practically tied to the number of students in the in-person model. If the growth trend of distance learning (EAD) continues, as has been the case in recent



years, this model should surpass in-person education this year. Remote courses have been attracting more students due to their logistical ease and lower costs. However, experts have pointed out the need to improve oversight of these degrees to avoid loss of quality – especially in strategic areas, such as teacher training. Colleges, in turn, say that there is a good structure and content offered in the modality [...] According to the data presented, last year, of the 9.9 million students in higher education, Brazil registered 4.9 million students in the distance learning modality and 5.06 million in the in-person model, a difference of only 150,220 enrollments. The previous data showed that of the 9.4 million students, 4.3 million were enrolled in distance learning and 5.1 million in face-to-face learning, a difference of 781,729 places (Ferreira, 2024, s/n).

The growth of distance learning (EAD) in Brazil is a reflection of technological transformations and the new demands of contemporary society, which demand more flexibility and accessibility in access to higher education. The fact that the number of enrollments in distance learning is practically tied with face-to-face learning, with a difference of only 150,220 enrollments in 2024, is an indication of the great expansion of this modality. “The absence of students in the classroom, the fact that they can organize their study schedules, the respect for students’ time, the flexibility of this educational modality and, mainly, the fact that it reaches places where in-person education does not reach – and at a lower cost – are basic arguments of the modality’s defenders”, states Santos (2019: 191). Thus, distance learning has proven to be a viable option for many students, especially given its logistical flexibility and more affordable costs compared to in-person courses, which often require travel and additional costs. The continued growth of this teaching modality, which may soon surpass the in-person model, is a “natural evolution” of the Brazilian educational system, which seeks to serve a growing number of students and expand access to higher education. For Santos (2019: 192), we cannot fail to mention that “[...] the analysis of the expansion of distance learning cannot fail to take into account the strength of the educational market and the incidence of entrepreneurs in the sector vis-à-vis decision-makers at all levels of government, including regulatory bodies”.

Distance learning is a form of teaching that enables self-learning, with the mediation of systematically organized teaching resources, presented in different information media, used alone or in combination, and disseminated through various means of communication (Brasil, 1998).

However, this accelerated expansion of distance learning raises a series of critical questions, especially with regard to the quality of the education offered. Experts have highlighted that, as the number of enrollments grows, so does the concern about the loss of quality, especially in strategic areas, such as teacher training (Santos, et. al., 2024).

Education is a fundamental field for the development of any nation, and adequate teacher training is an essential element to ensure the quality of basic and higher education, states Laval (2004). Teacher training requires a pedagogical approach that involves both theoretical and practical knowledge, something that distance learning often fails to provide in the same way as face-to-face teaching (Antunes; Pinto, 2017). Although colleges argue that the structure and content offered in the distance learning modality are adequate, the criticism lies in the way these institutions deal with the reality of implementing remote teaching on a large scale.

Criticism of the quality of distance learning is not new and involves both pedagogical and structural issues. The provision of courses on a large scale and the search for greater profitability can lead some institutions to neglect essential aspects of academic training (Santos, et. al., 2024). Oversight of distance learning courses needs to be intensified to ensure that students are not harmed by superficial or poorly structured education. The lack of rigorous monitoring can result in a phenomenon in which the number of enrollments increases, but the quality of education deteriorates. This is particularly problematic in areas such as teacher training, where the quality of education received directly impacts the future of countless children and young people in Brazil (Antunes; Pinto, 2017).

Since the first steps in the implementation of projects and training programs that use Distance Education (DE) in their development, especially after regulation and the creation of the Brazilian Open University System, and approximately ten years have passed, there has been no proposal to analyze/evaluate the results of the undertaking that aimed to provide access to higher education and its democratization. [...] There is no evidence to date of studies/research that expand the analysis regarding the impacts/results of an action that manifests in its origin a public policy aimed at increasing the number of places in higher education and focusing on teacher training. This as a possibility that the quality levels of elementary education could be improved (Alonso, 2014, p. 38).

In addition, the growth of DE also needs to be analyzed in light of regional and social inequalities in Brazil. Although the modality offers an opportunity for many students to access higher education, it can also deepen the digital divide, since not all students have access to adequate internet infrastructure or the technological devices necessary to participate in distance learning courses. In more peripheral regions and rural areas, this gap can be even more pronounced, making it difficult for part of the population to access higher education (Antunes; Pinto, 2017). Therefore, the expansion of distance learning must be accompanied by public policies that guarantee digital inclusion and equitable access to these new educational opportunities.

Statistics show that even as the number of distance learning enrollments grows, the number of students in face-to-face courses has been falling. From one year to the next, there was a reduction of approximately 49 thousand places in face-to-face courses. In the same period, there were almost 600 thousand more places in distance learning. Since last year [2023], the MEC has been reformulating the rules for distance learning. In June, the government suspended the creation of new courses in this modality until March of next year (our emphasis). In the same ordinance published in the Official Gazette of the Union, the ministry determined the reformulation of the quality parameters of EAD. In the last editions, the Census has shown significant growth in distance learning. The modality gained strength especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, when social isolation restricted in-person activities throughout the country. In the last ten years, as shown in the 2023 edition of the Census, the number of distance learning courses grew by 700%. The MEC attributes the accelerated pace of growth in EAD to a decree signed in 2017 (our emphasis), which made it easier to open distance learning centers in the country. In the year following the decree, the offer of EAD places exceeded the offer of in-person places. Since then, the model has been expanding, with a 167.5% increase in the number of places (Ferreira, 2024, s/n).

Distance learning (EAD) has gained a significant proportion in the Brazilian educational scenario, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, which accelerated the process of migration to remote teaching. The data presented indicate an impressive growth of 700% in the number of EAD courses in the last ten years, and a 167.5% increase in the number of places since the 2017 decree, which made the creation of EAD centers throughout the country more flexible. "From 2017 onwards, when the Temer government published decrees and ordinances that, ultimately, deregulated the modality from a quality perspective, opening the doors to uncontrolled and unquality expansion" (Santos, 2019, p.192). However, while distance learning is growing substantially, in-person education has been shrinking, with a reduction of 49,000 places in a single year, which indicates a transition from the traditional model to the remote model. These numbers reflect a significant change in the educational landscape, but they also raise complex questions about the quality and accessibility of distance learning.

For one thing, too, the expansion of distance learning has been seen as positive, especially when considering the democratization of access to higher education. The possibility of taking a degree without having to travel to a physical institution has proven to be a great advantage for those who live in more remote regions or in more adverse financial situations, says Alonso (2017). Flexible schedules, the possibility of reconciling work with studies and cost reduction are factors that make distance learning attractive to many students. However, as Alonso (2017: 39) points out:

If the numbers point in a certain direction, it is also important to check the provision of distance learning courses in the country, where there is also an indicative

movement of concentration by region, following what occurs with face-to-face teaching: in 2011, of a total of 817,887 enrollments in distance learning courses, 53% were from students in the South, 24% in the Southeast, 14% in the Central-West, 8% in the Northeast and only 1% in the North. There is, of course, a ratio between population and supply, however, if distance learning brings with it the idea, or rather, the proposal of greater flexibility in supply, as well as access, the distortion indicated could at least be minimized.

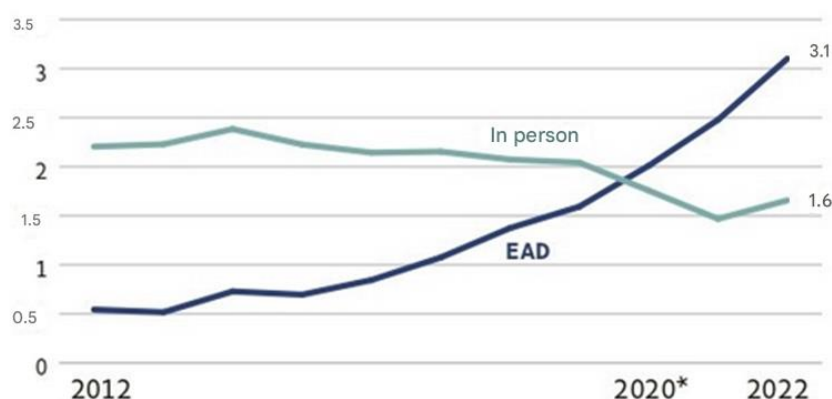
In addition, the rapid expansion of distance learning also raises concerns about the quality of education. Although the MEC has sought to reformulate the quality parameters of the modality, with the suspension of new courses until March 2025 and the reassessment of the guidelines, the monitoring and adequate structuring of distance learning colleges continue to be significant challenges. The accelerated growth, driven by policies such as the 2017 decree, may result in an excessive supply of vacancies without due attention to pedagogical quality. The precariousness of education, with the creation of courses without adequate infrastructure or without proper training of teachers, is a real risk. The lack of an effective pedagogical approach and the dependence on digital platforms may compromise the education of students, especially in courses that require greater interaction and practical training, such as in the areas of health and education.

Another critical point to be considered is the inequality in access to distance learning. Although distance learning offers flexibility, it does not resolve the issues of digital exclusion that still affect a large part of the Brazilian population. Access to adequate technologies and a stable internet connection are challenges that many students face, especially in more peripheral and rural regions. This factor could further increase educational inequalities, as while one segment of the population benefits from the expansion of distance learning, another may be left behind due to a lack of technological resources.

The growth trend of distance learning also requires a deeper reflection on the future of education in Brazil. Is the expansion of this modality really contributing to quality education, or are we simply observing a race for numbers and enrollments without considering the long-term implications for student education? Although distance learning has the potential to expand access to higher education, quality and pedagogical effectiveness cannot be compromised in the name of rapid expansion. The hybrid model, which combines the best of both modalities, in-person and distance learning, could be a more balanced solution, preserving the benefits of remote learning while ensuring the interaction and exchange of experiences that in-person learning offers..

GRAPH 1 – Growth of distance learning courses in Brazil (2013-2023).

From 2012-2022, in millions



\* Experts link the increase in enrollments in the EAD modality to the Covid-19 pandemic

Source: created by the authors (2024).

The demonstrative scale of the growth of distance learning courses in Brazil, as shown by the growing trend over the years. Since 2013, the number of distance learning courses has increased significantly, reaching approximately 6.5 million courses in 2023. The growth is especially notable after 2017, when the decree that made it easier to open distance learning centers boosted the supply of vacancies. The growth curve reflects the acceleration of the modality, which, in a few years, saw significant increases in the number of courses available.

Of the 47 thousand distance learning (EaD) centers that exist in Brazil, 46% are outsourced. In other words, in addition to delivering poor quality, these units are not even managed by those who created them. They are granted to unqualified third parties, in exchange for granting approximately 30% of the amount collected in monthly fees. This is a nefarious business, which transforms education into mere financial speculation. The data comes from the Ministry of Education (MEC) itself and was collected by Folha de S. Paulo (Cofen, 2024, s/n).

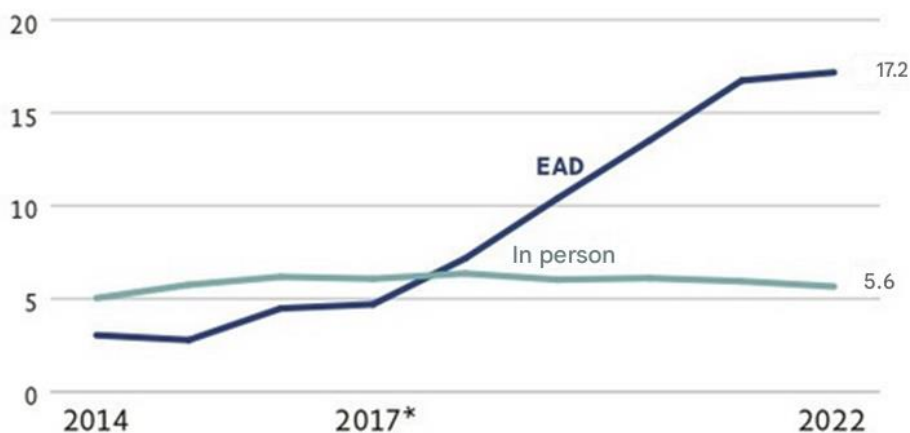
Based on the data collected by the Ministry of Education (MEC) and reported by Folha de Confen (Federal Nursing Council), it is worth noting that 46% of the 47,000 distance learning centers in Brazil are outsourced. This number points to a trend of disengagement of the institutions that create the courses, which transfer management to third parties, often without the necessary qualifications or infrastructure to guarantee educational quality. Outsourcing, in addition to weakening control over the training offered, contributes to the precariousness of teaching conditions, resulting in courses that often do not meet the standards required for the adequate training of professionals.

The main criticism falls on the business model behind this expansion, which, in many cases, reveals itself to be a mere financial strategy. For Mészáros, “[...] society, taking the human being as its parameter, demands overcoming the dehumanizing logic of capital, which is based on individualism, profit and competition” (Mészáros, 2008, p. 09). Thus, granting approximately 30% of the revenue from tuition fees to outsourced companies, without any real improvement in the quality of education or in the infrastructure of the centers, denotes a situation in which education is treated as a commodity, as Mészáros states. The market logic imposes profit as a priority, to the detriment of the necessary investment in pedagogical resources, teaching materials and ongoing teacher training, compromising the educational proposal of EAD.

The neoliberal school designates a certain school model that considers education as an essentially private good and whose value is, above all, economic. It is not society that guarantees all its members a right to culture; it is individuals who must capitalize on private resources whose future income will be guaranteed by society. This privatization is a phenomenon that affects both the meaning of knowledge, the institutions that transmit values and knowledge, and social relations themselves (Laval, 2004, p. 11-12).

In this way, this distance learning model not only reflects the precariousness of higher education, but also reinforces inequalities in access to quality education. In more remote regions, where the supply of in-person courses is limited, the promise of access to higher education via distance learning often translates into low-quality access. The lack of adequate management in outsourced centers contributes to deficient education, without the necessary support for the student to develop fully..

GRAPH 2 – Number of places offered in undergraduate courses, by teaching modality (2024).



\* In 2017, federal decree 9,057 and normative ordinance number 11 of the MEC eliminated the on-site evaluation of EAD centers and allowed fully distance learning courses, without the need for face-to-face activities.

Source: MEC/INEP; Higher Education Census (2022).



The graph shows the evolution in the number of places offered in undergraduate courses in Brazil, by teaching modality, between 2014 and 2022, highlighting distance learning (EAD) and in-person courses. While the number of in-person places remained stable, with a slight reduction, reaching 5.6 million in 2022, EAD registered significant growth, going from approximately 5 million in 2017 to 17.2 million in 2022. This expansion was driven by regulatory changes in 2017, including federal decree 9,057 and normative ordinance number 11 of the MEC, which eliminated the requirement for in-person assessment at EAD centers and allowed courses to be entirely distance-learned. Thus, these data indicate a significant transformation in the Brazilian higher education scenario, with EAD consolidating itself as the predominant modality.

These measures, however, were aborted in 2017, when the Temer government published decrees and ordinances that, ultimately, deregulated the modality from the perspective of quality, opening the doors to uncontrolled and unqualified expansion. In this vein, Michel Temer's high school reform allows up to 20% of the total workload during the day and up to 30% during the night to be covered by distance learning activities. The current president also sees distance learning as a way to reduce the cost of public education, with the advantage of combating what he calls "Marxism" in the classroom. Bolsonaro already advocated, in his government program, the provision of distance learning from elementary school onwards (Santos, 2019, p. 194).

The exponential growth of Distance Learning (EAD) in Brazil, evidenced by the data in the graph, should be analyzed in light of issues related to the quality and regulation of the modality. Starting in 2017, with decree 9,057 and regulatory ordinance no. 11 of the MEC, the Temer government deregulated the provision of distance learning courses by eliminating the need for in-person assessments at the centers and allowing the creation of fully distance learning courses. Although these measures expanded access to higher education, they also raised concerns about the quality of the education offered. The regulatory easing paved the way for unbridled expansion, often associated with cost reduction by educational institutions, but without due monitoring to ensure adequate educational standards.

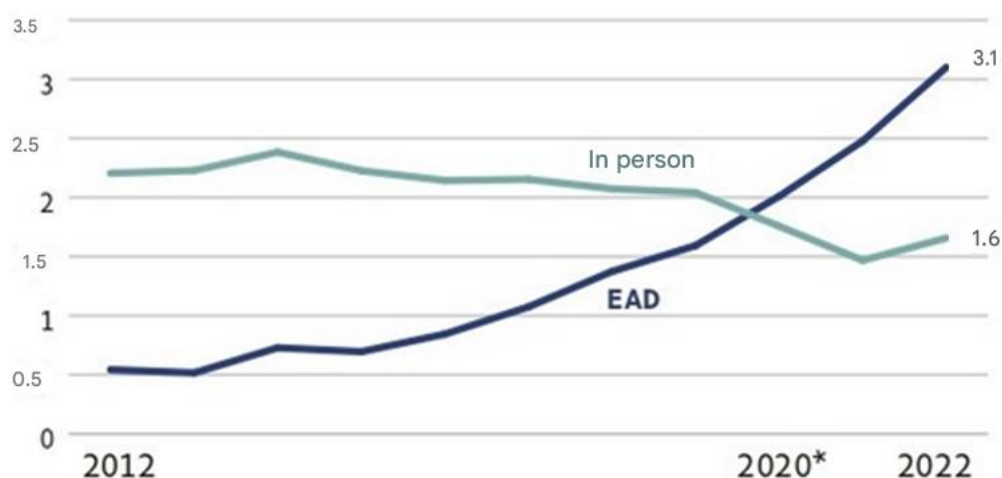
In addition, the reforms implemented in secondary education during the Temer government also integrated distance learning in a questionable way, allowing up to 20% of the workload in daytime shifts and up to 30% in nighttime shifts to be carried out in this modality. This decision, while seeking to adapt to contemporary demands for flexibility and accessibility, ignores structural challenges, such as the lack of technological infrastructure

in many public schools and the lack of specific training for teachers to work with digital tools.

During the Bolsonaro administration, the discourse of reducing the cost of public education through distance learning was accompanied by an ideological vision that sought to combat what was called “Marxism” in the classroom. This strategy disregarded the complexity of students’ comprehensive education and prioritized a utilitarian logic, focused more on reducing costs than on promoting an emancipatory and critical education. Bolsonaro even proposed implementing distance learning from elementary school onwards, an idea that disregards the pedagogical specificities of this educational stage and the risks of digital exclusion in a country marked by profound social and regional inequalities..

GRAPH 3 – Number of entrants to undergraduate courses in the in-person and distance learning modalities (2022).

From 2012-2022, in millions



\* Experts link the increase in enrollments in the EAD modality to the Covid-19 pandemic

Source: MEC/INEP; Higher Education Census (2022).

The graph shows data on the number of new entrants to undergraduate courses in Brazil, differentiating between in-person and distance learning (EAD) modalities, from 2012 to 2022. It can be seen that, while the number of entrants to the in-person modality declined consistently, going from approximately 2.4 million in 2012 to 1.6 million in 2022, the EAD modality registered exponential growth, jumping from approximately 500 thousand entrants in 2012 to 3.1 million in 2022. This crossover between the lines of the two formats

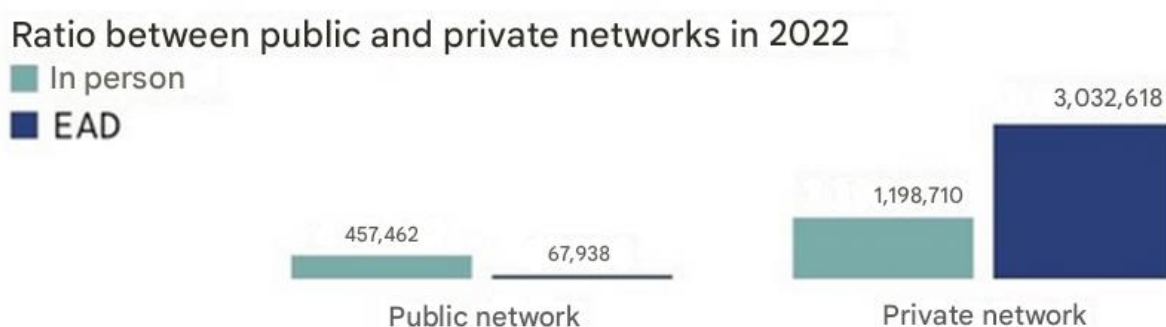
occurred around 2020, when the number of entrants to EAD courses exceeded that of the in-person modality.

This phenomenon is closely related to the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, which began in 2020, and the consequent intensification of digital technologies in education. Social isolation measures and the suspension of in-person classes accelerated the transition to remote learning, highlighting the potential of distance learning as a viable alternative for continuing studies. However, this transition also exposed inequalities in access to quality internet and appropriate technological devices, challenges that still persist in several regions of Brazil.

In addition, the growth of distance learning reflects structural changes in the Brazilian education system, including the expansion of course offerings by private institutions and regulatory flexibility that facilitated the implementation of this modality. Although distance learning has democratized access to higher education, allowing students from remote locations and with fewer resources to enter university, the quality of teaching and pedagogical support continue to be critical issues.

In short, the growth of distance learning in Brazil reveals both technological advances and the social and structural challenges of higher education, especially with regard to ensuring inclusive and quality education for all..

GRAPH 4 – Proportion between public and private networks in 2022.



Source: MEC/INEP; Higher Education Census (2022).

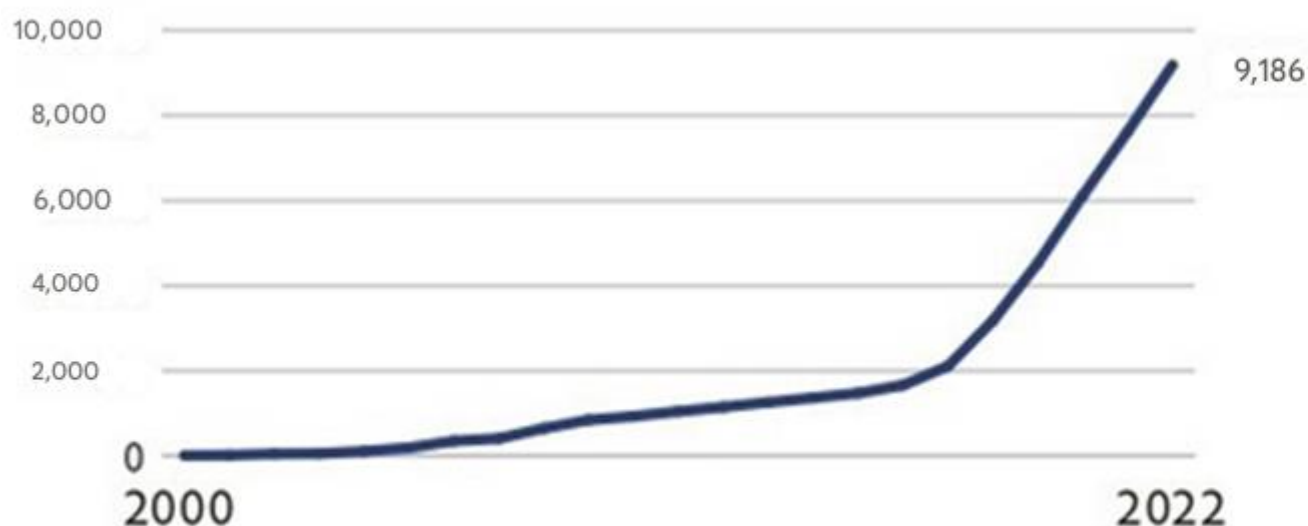
The graph shows the proportion of new entrants to in-person and distance learning undergraduate courses (EAD) in 2022, distributed between public and private networks. The predominance of the private network in the EAD modality is notable, with 3,032,618 entrants, in contrast to only 67,938 in the public network. In the in-person modality, the private network also leads with 1,198,710 entrants, while the public network registers

457,462. These numbers reflect the hegemony of the private sector in the Brazilian educational scenario, especially in distance learning, and raise questions about the implications of this model for the quality of academic and professional training.

The expansion of EAD in the private network is directly related to the advancement of the neoliberal model in Brazilian education. Under the mercantile logic, education begins to be treated as a product, with a focus on maximizing profits to the detriment of the quality of teaching. The low operational cost of distance learning, compared to in-person teaching, favors the exponential growth of private institutions in this sector, often without the necessary guarantee of technological infrastructure, pedagogical support or adequate teacher training. In this context, the consequences for the quality of professional training are worrying. The lack of direct contact between students and teachers, combined with the standardization of content on digital platforms, can limit the development of critical and practical skills necessary for the job market. In addition, students in distance learning courses, especially in private institutions, face greater challenges related to dropout and lack of engagement, reinforcing existing educational inequalities. The predominance of distance learning in the private sector also deepens social exclusion. While the modality presents itself as an accessible solution, it often does not meet the specific demands of vulnerable populations, who lack access to adequate technologies and quality internet. The lack of public policies to strengthen distance learning in the public sector, in turn, prevents this modality from being an effective tool for democratizing higher education. Finally, the neoliberal model applied to education, with the proliferation of private distance learning courses, weakens the role of education as a public and collective good. Academic education loses its emancipatory character and becomes an instrument for adapting to the market, aligned with the interests of capital. To reverse this scenario, it is essential to rethink public financing of distance learning and implement policies that guarantee quality and equity in access to higher education, valuing both critical training and the integral development of students..

**GRAPH 5 – Demonstration of the growth of distance learning courses in Brazil in 2022.**

Number of courses from 2000-2022



Sources: MEC/INEP; Higher Education Census

Source: MEC/INEP; Higher Education Census (2022).

The graph shows an exponential increase in the number of higher education courses in Brazil between 2000 and 2022, with an impressive 189.1% increase between 2018 and 2022. This growth reflects significant changes in the Brazilian educational landscape, driven by the expansion of distance learning (EAD), the relaxation of educational regulations, and the strong participation of the private sector in offering undergraduate courses.

The period from 2018 to 2022 was particularly notable due to the consolidation of EAD as a predominant modality in higher education. This increase is associated, in part, with the COVID-19 pandemic, which accelerated the adoption of digital technologies and the remote teaching model. In this context, the reduction in operating costs for institutions and the possibility of scaling the educational offering became attractive for opening new courses, especially in the private sector.

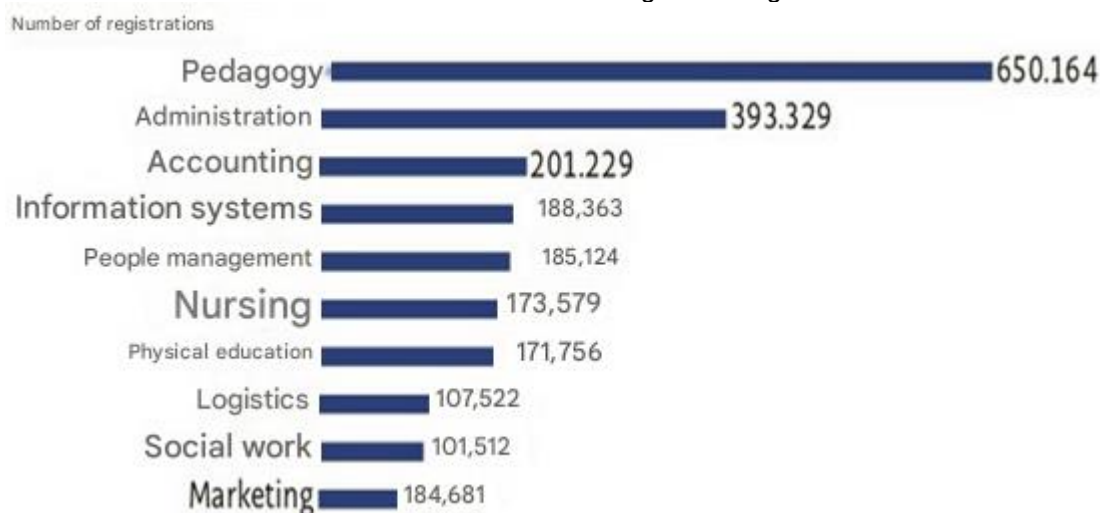
Despite the significant growth in the number of courses, critical questions arise about the quality of the education offered. The rapid pace of expansion may have compromised fundamental aspects, such as technological infrastructure, teacher training, and curricular adaptation to the demands of the job market and society. In many cases, the

proliferation of courses reflects a search for profitability rather than for transformative and excellent education.

Another point to highlight is the inequality in access to and quality of education. Although the increase in the number of courses expands opportunities for entry into higher education, the excessive focus on distance learning, especially in private institutions, may not serve the most vulnerable populations equally. Students from rural areas or those with financial difficulties often face barriers related to internet access and a lack of pedagogical support.

Finally, the analysis of these data highlights the impact of neoliberal policies on the education sector, which prioritize the commercialization of education to the detriment of its social and emancipatory function. Quantitative expansion alone does not guarantee the development of quality education that promotes equality and comprehensive education. Therefore, it is essential that public policies be adopted that ensure minimum quality standards and that restore the public and transformative nature of higher education in Brazil..

GRAPH 6 – Distribution of enrollment in the ten largest undergraduate courses in 2022.



Source: MEC/INEP; Higher Education Census (2022).

The graph shows the distribution of enrollments in the ten largest undergraduate courses in Brazil in 2022, with a focus on Pedagogy, which leads with 650,164 enrollments, followed by Administration (393,329) and Accounting (201,229). These numbers reflect the profile of the demand for training in the country, often driven by the expansion of distance learning (EAD), especially in areas with high labor demand and initial training requirements.



The dominance of Pedagogy in this ranking is significant, considering that a large part of enrollments occur in the EAD modality. This predominance is directly linked to policies to expand access to higher education and the growing demand for teachers, especially in basic education. However, training future pedagogues in a predominantly remote manner can bring challenges to professional practice, since this area requires constant contact with the school environment, face-to-face experiences and practical interactions that are often not fully replicated in the EAD model.

Administration, the second course with the highest number of enrollments, reflects the interest in areas focused on management and entrepreneurship, sectors with high employability. However, the distance learning model in these courses can limit the development of interpersonal skills and practical abilities necessary for the job market, such as leadership and problem-solving in collaborative environments. This can negatively impact professional performance, especially in a scenario that increasingly demands a multidisciplinary and creative approach.

The predominance of distance learning in courses such as Accounting, Information Systems and Logistics also raises questions about the quality of training in areas that depend on practical applications and specific tools, often available only in laboratory or in-person environments. The limited interactions between teachers and students and the difficulty in assessing practical skills can compromise the comprehensive training of these professionals.

In people's daily lives, the popularization of distance learning democratizes access to higher education, especially for populations in remote regions or with financial and time constraints. However, the quality of education offered often varies between institutions and courses, producing professionals who may not be fully prepared for the challenges of the job market. This also impacts academic knowledge, as research and knowledge production may be deprioritized in favor of courses that aim to meet the market logic of rapid certification and reduced costs.

Liberal education reforms are therefore doubly guided by the growing role of knowledge in economic activity and by the restrictions imposed by the systematic competition of economies. The reforms that, on a global scale, push for decentralization, standardization of methods and content, and new "management" of schools for the "professionalization" of teachers are fundamentally "competitiveness-centered" (Laval, 2004, p. 11-12).

Therefore, while distance learning plays an essential role in expanding access to higher education, it is necessary to ensure quality standards that respect the specificities of each area of knowledge. Without this care, the consequences may include insufficient training, greater difficulty in professional integration, and the perpetuation of educational inequalities in Brazil.

## **CONCLUSION**

Distance Education (DE) in Brazil is a multifaceted phenomenon that combines significant advances in access to education with structural and ideological challenges that question its ability to promote social justice. On the one hand, DE emerges as a powerful tool for democratizing education, especially in a country marked by regional inequalities and infrastructure limitations. By allowing students in remote and marginalized areas to access higher education, this modality expands opportunities and offers a viable alternative to the logistical and financial difficulties of in-person education.

However, the accelerated expansion of DE is deeply influenced by a market logic that prioritizes numbers over quality. This influence, intensified by neoliberal policies, has transformed education into a commodity, facilitating the proliferation of private institutions that often lack adequate quality standards and pedagogical supervision. As a result, the access provided by DE does not always translate into solid and transformative education. Instead, it can reinforce inequalities, especially when students face digital exclusion or encounter precarious educational structures.

From a social justice perspective, distance learning has the potential to make a significant contribution, but this requires an approach that transcends profit. It is essential that public policies ensure rigorous regulation, promote digital inclusion and invest in teacher training, ensuring that distance education meets high standards and respects the needs of students. Without these efforts, distance education runs the risk of perpetuating an exclusionary and low-quality model, aligned with the interests of the educational market.

Therefore, the central question – whether distance education promotes democracy and social justice or is subordinate to the market – depends on how this modality is implemented. From a humanistic and inclusive perspective, it can be an instrument of social transformation. However, if guided exclusively by market interests, distance education will continue to serve more as a commercial strategy than as an educational solution. The future of this modality in Brazil lies in the ability to balance expansion with

quality, accessibility with equity, and technological innovation with pedagogical commitment..

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