

# Is there a future for distance learning in Brazil?

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## **Abstract**

In the past, distance learning in Brazil followed a similar pattern to the rest of the world, with regard to the kind of teaching-learning offered and mainly consisted of correspondence courses. In spite of the wide dissemination of distance learning and its historical success, its methodology was always criticized on prejudicial grounds and associated with courses of a low or dubious standard. However, There has been a considerable change in this attitude in the last 15 years, with the emergence of Internet. Basically, higher education distance learning has begun to become a reality in the country on account of both the Internet and new Brazilian legislation which now allows up to 20% of the current syllabus in the Curriculum to be provided in a distance learning format using the new technology. As a result, there has been a flurry of activity – almost a revolution – in Brazilian education with the setting up of a new market for online educators. Thus, the kind of distance-learning that is having success in Brazil is that which manages to offer the best cost-benefits both for the student and for the institution which is able to attract the largest number of students at a reasonable cost. As a result, The web or e-learning that might be valuable from a pedagogical standpoint, in institutional terms, has proved to be very expensive and even elitist. This research has outlined the state of the art of distance learning in Brazil and advocates employing work-based learning as a methodological framework to introduce innovations in Distance Learning in HE, by combining the students needs and the opportunities provided by the web with the academic resources from the University.

## **Keywords**

Higher Education, Work-Based Learning, e-learning

Brazil has always been a country that has lacked education. In spite of all the efforts made by the government to eradicate illiteracy, the rate still remains at the shocking and depressing figure of between 10% and 15%, depending on the age group and sex (10% in the case of women and 15% in that of men). In view of this, in a country in such need of academic training, it would be beside the point and unduly pretentious to expect that something can be done to make higher education more accessible to adult workers in as much as the current figure which is between 5% and 8%. Thus higher education in Brazil has ceased to be a priority of the government and despite the increasing demands of public institutions ended up by only catering for an elite that have attended the best private colleges in the country and succeeded in passing their entrance exams in the selective process of higher education. In catering for this increasing demand, currently in Brazil more than 70% of adult students attend private institutions of higher education, paying monthly fees ranging from R\$ 300 to R\$ 1500. The number of private higher education institutions in the country has grown by more than 150% in the last 30 years although the market has now reached saturation point. This is partly on account of the opportunities offered by distance learning and the number of large national and international organizations that can be found throughout the country.

Distance Learning has existed for over 100 years in Brazil but has always been regarded as of a doubtful standard since it is mainly concerned with secondary and elementary education. However, with advances in technology and the arrival of the Internet in the 1990s, distance learning has emerged as a means of offering new prospects of making higher education more accessible to adults. In holding this belief, in the last 20 years, the Brazilian government has introduced improved legislation to encourage the widespread use of new technology in distance learning courses. As a result, the private teaching institutions, aware of the pressing demand for professional qualifications, as well as the size of Brazil, have begun to invest heavily in e-learning for higher education.

Centre and Departments for Distance Learning have been set up and research projects undertaken to form new virtual learning environments. Moreover, with the chance to devote 20% of the curricular schedule to distance learning courses, it seems that e-learning in higher education has really taken off. However, from an educational perspective, what seemed to be innovative and radical has turned out to be reactionary and

repetitive, suggesting little real progress has been made in the last hundred years. Furthermore, although it was hoped that the new distance learning would be more accessible to students than the traditional form and would at least be of a comparable standard, in Brazil it did not achieve the success that had been expected. It was found to be elitist, and lacking in interactivity and failed to offer students any stimulation. The private higher education institutions believed that as a result of the new technology and the prospect of increasing the number of places, higher education distance learning would be a real success from a cost-benefit viewpoint but this also failed to materialize.

The business model which proved to be very successful for the private higher education institutions was the offer of higher teacher-training courses through the medium of satellites. These relayed information on the basis of franchises to represent these institutions and this led to the spreading of the model of viewing centre throughout the country. The University of North Paraná (Unopar), for example, which launched the first course via satellite in 2001, had set up 300 franchises by June 2006 with 700 viewing-centre and over 80,000 students enrolled in higher education distant learning courses.

When the systems combined T.V. technology and the network of satellite signals with receiver systems organised locally for groups of students (and in the same space where students were given tutorial supervision and supplementary lessons), these features came to be known as "tele-presence learning" (half-percent face to face learning).

Unfortunately, at present, the "state of the art" of distance learning in Brazil is mass-produced, profit-making (from an institutional standpoint) and ineffective (from a teacher-learning standpoint). The only innovative aspect is the business model.

In the light of this picture and in an attempt to seek new teacher-learning alternatives for higher education, the aim of this work is to extend the concept of "Work-based learning", which has mainly been adopted in England so that it can be introduced or tropicalized in Brazil as a means of making higher education more accessible to the adult working-class. The concept of work-based learning adopted here, is based on the description provided by David Boud in "Work-Based Learning: a new higher education". In this work, the author defines the term as being the use of the environment, the work-place and its everyday activities as a teaching methodology for people who already have previous professional experience and who need academic training to improve their professional qualifications.

In England, the number of teaching institutions that have employed this methodology has grown in the last 10 years as well as the degree of student satisfaction. The adult student feels more motivated when he/she is aware of a practical application of the theory being adopted during the course and acquires a real sense of learning. Thus, the work-based learning model could be adopted in Brazil as an alternative to higher learning via satellite and together with the growing number of corporative universities that are springing up in the country.

The purpose of this work is - together with SEBRAE (Brazilian Micro and Small Business Support Services) which is designed to organize and provide professional qualifications to small businesses in the area of management - to employ the concept in the area of professional training. It does this by making the best use of time and concentrating on the practical side of learning so that it can be shown to be a motivating factor in the learning of adults.

This work also sets out to employ the methodology of Work-Based Learning as a way of opening up new opportunities and alternatives to higher distance learning. It employs the concept of reflexive and meaningful learning, in accordance with the needs of adult workers.

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