

UAB's Reflex on Cities and Local Support Centers to Distance Education

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Abstract—The associated support centers constitute privileged spaces, in the offering of courses at a distance, in which students can look for help to solve their doubts and to deal with themes of administrative or academic issues, and which are part in the operational structure of a number of renowned institutions in that teaching modality. In Brazil and for the Open University of Brazil (Universidade Aberta do Brasil – UAB), these centers were called Face-to-face Support Poles (Polos de Apoio Presencial). The poles originated from the articulation, interaction and effettivation of a partnership among the three governmental levels (federal, state and city) with the Public Institutions of Higher Education (Instituições Públicas de Ensino Superior – IPES), linked to the UAB system. The presence of a face-to-face support pole together with its diverse organizational and structural factors, and with the offering of courses by the IPES, created a new social and human development movement in the cities or regions in which it was installed. The present paper aims at pointing those essencial aspects and the main reflexes generated with the installation of UAB support poles in the cities in which the Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina – UFSC, and the Instituto Federal de Tecnologia de Santa Catarina – IFSC function.

Index Terms—Distance education, pole management, face-to-face support pole, UAB.

I. INTRODUCTION

The transformations experienced in the educational processes appear in the building of new social, cultural, political and economic relations. It has already become clear that information and knowledge are cornerstones in contemporary society, and have led the evolutive cycles of human kind. Education reflects and determines such cycles, as the technological transformations are appropriate and adequate for Distance Education, as a teaching modality.

Having in mind the availability of new information and communication technologies, the decision of offering courses at a distance have demanded ever greater initial investments, especially in the preparation of the staff, in technological infrastructure, in the production of didactic material, in communication systems, in monitoring and management, in the installation of associated support centers, in logistics of maintenance and in products distribution, among others.

In open universities, instituted in Europe by the end of the 1960s and beginning of the 1970s, as the Open University – UK (1967) and the Universidad Nacional de Educacion a Distancia UNED – ES (1972), one of the first strategies for students to have access to information from

different disciplines was focused on the use of printed material and in the face-to-face support centers. Such institutions, by the time when they were created, aimed at reaching those populations that did not have access to face-to-face education, thus bringing a great advantage both for the lives of these citizens and for the country – which, by that means tried to reach parts of society in a move in search for quality in order to assure the opportunity of filling new work posts created by technological innovations.

In that same period – the end of the 1960s and beginning of the 1970s, a number of experiments were carried out, inspired in the European scenery, and quickly abandoned for a viable alternative, receiving continued investments [1]. It was only in 2006 with the creation of the Open University of Brazil system (sistema Universidade Aberta do Brasil– UAB), instituted by the Decreto 5.800, on June 8, 2006, with a view at the development of the Distance Education modality – EaD [2], that the project was resumed for a more effective and continued offer of courses at a distance at the Brazilian Public Institutions of Higher Education (IPES). And according to its conception, UAB functions under a collaborative regime, with the face-to-face support pole as the “operational unit for the decentralized development of pedagogical and administrative activities related to the courses and programs offered at a distance by the public institutions of higher education” [3].

According to the decree, the UAB was instituted for “the development of the modality at a distance, with a view at expanding and interiorized the offer of higher education courses and educational programs in the country.” And it adds: it promotes the distance education modality in the public institutions of higher education, and supports research in innovative methodologies for higher education with information and communication technologies. In addition, it stimulates the collaboration between the federal government and other federative entities, and promotes the creation of permanent formation centers by means of the face-to-face support poles at strategic localities.

To plant the seed of the quality of the public university in distant and isolated sites stimulates the development of cities with low HDI (Human Development Index) and low IDEB (Basic Education Development Index). Thus, it works as an efficient tool for the universalization of the access to higher education e for requalification of the teacher in other disciplines, thus strengthening the school in distant places in Brazil. That minimizes the concentration of undergraduate courses at the great urban centers, while avoiding the migratory movement to the large cities [4].

The official discourse, however, does not reflect the numbers. In a recent work Ramos [5] analyzes the policies for the expansion of Higher Education in Brazil during the administrations from 2003 through 2010 and stresses that selectivity, a characteristic in Brazilian education, has been kept at elevated levels during the last years, even with the expansion programs, with UAB among them. According to that author, the social selectivity in Higher Education in relation to Basic Education increased 42.12% from 68.73% (p. 82) in 2003, and in spite of the investments made, only 14.4% of the potential undergraduate students (youths from 18 to 24 years old) are enrolled in a higher education institution.

One believes that the transformation of such scenery will demand a performance from the support poles that are part in the UAB system beyond the simple offer of infrastructure for the courses. Such a space must be integrated to the social-political tissue of the community, in which it is inserted, creating positive reflexes that can be observed on the medium term (IDEB), or in the long term (HDI). In the present work data from a sample by the coordinators of support poles at the Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina and at the Instituto Federal de Tecnologia de Santa Catarina are analyzed in terms of the reflexes of the installation of the support pole in that city or region.

II. THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS

A. *Distance Education and the Support from the Face-to-face Support Pole UAB*

The support poles imply in the existence of a network of agents who perform administrative and management functions, in addition to the fundamental role of supporting the learning process of the students. Those courses conducted at each pole can be offered by different educational institutions, and each pole can be under the rule of the city, or of the state government, or both, which are called Mantenedores (Maintainers), and which must offer the “physical and technological infrastructure for the ample development of those activities referring to the offered courses,” as well as to hire staff for the “execution of the proposed goals and activities” under the guidance of the UAB system” Ref. [4].

The pole is the space equipped with physical infrastructure and logistics that is directed for giving support for the students. It must have research and teaching laboratories, computer laboratories, library, technological resources, among others, that are compatible with the offered courses.

At the pole one finds important agents for the students' support, like the face-to-face tutor – an academic adviser with an adequate undergraduate degree, who will be responsible for giving attention to the students at the support poles in the cities. In that space the student can also count on the services of secretaries and on the pedagogical and logistic support by the coordinator of the pole.

The coordinator of the pole is responsible for its management, which includes the structuring and coordination of the actions for the implementation and maintenance of the activities at the pole, the coordination of technological, didactic and human resources in accordance with those universities working at the pole and the UAB/MEC, to keep the data relating to the pole updated and, whenever asked, to present to IES/UAB/MEC the report of the fol-

low up of the activities developed at the pole, as well as other information and documents.

Thus, it is at the support pole that the face-to-face activities demanded by the law, as evaluation of the students, presentation of final papers, specific lab classes when demanded, obligatory practical training – whenever demanded by pertinent law – in addition to the offering of guidance to the students by the tutors, videoconference, individual and group study activities with the use of computer labs and library, among other activities.

In face of the diversity of the offered courses, together with the physical distance separating each from the institution offering the courses, and the different Mantenedores (city or state), and other aspects that constitute the complexity of DE, comes the need to establish specific mechanisms for the implementation and management of the courses, in which human resources are most important, comprising a multidisciplinary staff “with the functions of planning, implementing and management of the courses at a distance” [6]. In such staff there are, in addition to those professionals from the Institution offering the courses, the technical-administrative workers, the coordinator of the pole and the face-to-face tutors.

So in order to promote the perfecting of the coordinators of the poles, the face-to-face tutors and of other actors involved in the offering of courses at a distance, a space was created for their formation and capacitation, in which UFSC and IFSC came to develop, since 2008, a Program for Continued Formation and Capacitation – Programa de Formação e Capacitação Continuada (PACC/ UAB-UFSC-IFSC). There, one of the lines of action is the Capacitation of the Poles, which offers the course “Capacitação de Coordenadores de Polo, Tutores Presenciais e equipe técnica na área de informática” (Capacitation of Coordinators, Face-to-face tutors and technical staff in computers).

For the two institutions in that partnership the process of capacitation of pole coordinators became a strategic action in the context of the program for continued formation and capacitation (PACC/ UAB-UFSC-IFSC) in face of the need of defining a strategic management of the pole concerning the needs of the city and of the dynamics of the offering Institutions and of the UAB/MEC Program. As a result from such a move to enlarge the critical mass and to create a space to divulge the results obtained by the many actors involved in that system, a specific space was created, the Research Seminar on Distance Education – SEPEAD (Seminário de Pesquisa em Educação a Distância).

In October 2011 happened the III SEPEAD. During that event, the coordinators of the support poles and the mayors of the cities involved were invited to follow the presentation of themes relating to the reflexes from the installation of the poles in their respective cities. Two support poles were selected, those at São Francisco de Paula and at Cachoeira do Sul, both in the state of Rio Grande do Sul (RS), according to the connection with the two institutions participating in the PACC, their structures and, more specifically, the support from local city halls.

As a result of the presentations in that event, and based on a specific theoretical frame, a study was made in which analytical categories were identified comprising a model of requirements, as illustrated on Table 1. Such a model of requirements was analyzed and the result was presented at

the 4^a Conferência Internacional sobre Educação e Novas Tecnologias de Aprendizagem - Edulearn 2012 [7]; at the end of the presentation of that study a final suggestion was made to carry out new research works including a greater number of poles.

TABLE I.
CATEGORIES OF ANALYTICAL QUESTIONS FOR EVALUATION OF FACE-TO-FACE SUPPORT POLE

CATEGORY – LIBERATING EDUCATION
Autonomy in building learning Organization of time and space at the pole
CATEGORY – INFRASTRUCTURE DIRECTED AT THE MODEL OF THE COURSE
Possibility of maintaining the course for a long period Room in the marketplace Economy of resources (time/material/transportation) Collective use of laboratories Stimulus to the local economy Social and cultural inclusion Social and professional ascension Stimulus to autonomy and confidence
CATEGORY – POLITICAL/DEMOCRATIC IMPACT
Extension of social relations Development of critical thought Access to computers (digital literacy) Contribution of the students to the society/company (research/extension) Participation in community actions A importância do apoio da Administração Municipal
CATEGORY – RESULTS FROM THE COURSE
Permanence and success x model Students' reports (insertion) Extension (activities and courses) Scope of the pole The mayor/the students
CATEGORY – DEMOGRAPHIC DATA
Number of courses Number of Educational Institutions in the city Number of students Number of graduated students Size of the City/urban or rural Local economy

Thus, a new opportunity appeared in June 2012 with the event of the IV SEPEaD, in which researchers, tutors and pole coordinators, in addition to the general public with an interest in DE participated. It was possible, then, to apply a primary research tool with an enlarged group of coordinators, considering the analytical categories presented on Table 1. In all, 27 representatives took part in the research.

The analytical categories present in the questionnaire were defined based on the common aspects identified in the literature on themes relating to face-to-face support poles, and take into account a set of issues for the evaluation of the development of the face-to-face support pole as a center of convergence in the city in the process of technological inclusion.

The questionnaire presented 16 questions with answers to mark, so that the coordinator of the pole could identify within a scale – 1 (little) to 5 (much) – at what extent each of the items was present in the reality of the pole and/or in the reality of the community and of those students who used the pole. From each coordinator was asked to make comments on the marked answers. In the questionnaire were also included 12 questions for each coordinator to allow their report on the specificities of each pole. For the analysis of the reports presented the software QualiQuantSoft was used, in order to organize the data, which were discussed and analyzed qualitatively, and shall be presented in the following section.

III. ANALYSES AND DISCUSSION – OBTAINED RESULTS

The analytical categories indicated on Table 1 allowed the constitution of a set of questions for evaluating the evolution of the face-to-face support pole as a convergence center in the city along the process of social and technological inclusion. As a result of that research 27 answered questionnaires were delivered by the coordinators. They will now be presented according to those categories defined in the research.

A. Analytical Category 1: Liberating education

Under that analytical category, and according to the classification criteria (see Table 1), aspects relating to the autonomy in the building of learning and the organization of time and space of teaching at the pole are presented. Considering that the pedagogical and didactic autonomy still stands as a challenge for education at a distance, the coordinators presented some important reports related to that scenery. For example:

“That modality develops abilities that are perceived by the students – discipline, autonomy, organization, more reading, flexibility”.

“With time the students came to acquire greater confidence in the activities, they are more present, resort to the pole in order to organize study groups.”

“In the beginning of the first courses at the pole there was some doubt on DE, the majority didn't believe in it. After the installation and along the courses there was and there still is a great demand, because all were convinced that it is possible and serious.”

“The pole gave the opportunity for the students to gain autonomy in building knowledge, mediated by the teachers and tutors.”

“In the beginning of a course the student experiences the conflict of organizing time and autonomy. But right after he is able to defy such barriers and go on without stress.”

“Many students complain that there is an excess of activities in the beginning of the courses, however, when they adapt to the modality and integrate with their colleagues the complaints end.”

“Each Day there was something to learn. We learned together, while structuring the pole in a way to facilitate the students' access. We have courses arranged without schedule clash.”

According to Figure 1 below, the result of the evaluation by the coordinators about that first item indicate: a) 81.5% marked 4 or 5 claiming that there was an organization of learning time and space at the pole; and b) 85.2% also marked 4 or 5 that there was a promotion of autonomy in the building of learning. Thus, it reinforces the initial idea that one has when one thinks of DE, autonomy and flexibility of time and space.

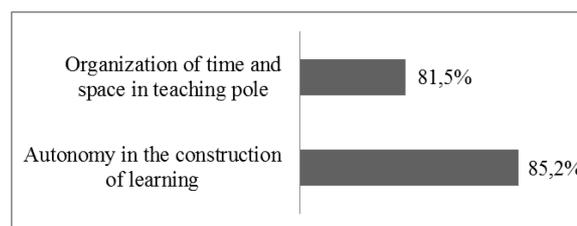


Figure 1. Aspects relative to liberating education. Source: the authors

B. Analytical Category 2: Infrastructure directed to the course model

Under that analytical category, according to the adopted classification criteria as expressed in Table 1, aspects related to the following issues are included: possibility of staying in the course for a long period of time; opportunities in the marketplace; economy of resources (time/material/transportation); promotion of the local economy; social and cultural inclusion; social and professional ascent; stimulus for autonomy and confidence.

The staying of the student in the course depends on a series of factors, which have been a research theme for those who deal with the DE modality. Some of these research works try to relate the statistical data on permanence to the success of a determinate course, with some strategies for conducting the course and for the use of educational material. In the case at issue one analyzed how the conditions of infrastructure and the installations at the pole help the students and the community. The coordinators answered by marking 4 or 5, as shown in Figure 2.

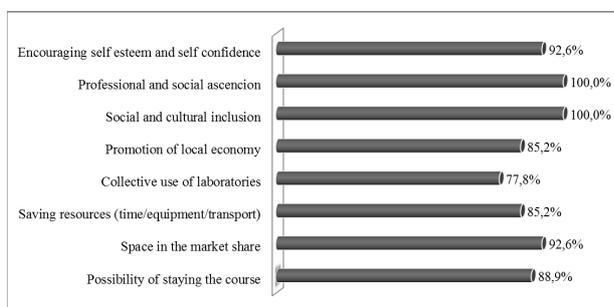


Figure 2. Infrastructure directed at the course model. Source: the authors

The main comments presented by the coordinators in relation to that item were:

“The stimulus to those students that stay in the course is positive. The pole is an agreeable place, the students feel they belong to the IES, and that’s great.”

“It is gratifying to perceive the degree of satisfaction of the students by means of their testimonies – a lot of demand for the courses at the pole.”

“The creation of the pole brings development in all spheres, be them social, cultural or economic.”

“That modality came to open new horizons, doors for Professional ascension.”

C. Analytical Category 3: Political/democratic impact

Under that analytical category according to the adopted classification criteria as expressed in Table 1, aspects related to the following issues are included: expansion of social relations; development of critical thought; access to computers (digital literacy); contribution of the students to society/company (research – extension activities); participation in communitarian actions; the significance of the support by the city hall.

Thus this study tried to find how the coordinators graded the reflexes of the participation of the students in the courses offered, as well as in other activities carried out at the poles in terms of the items included in this analytical category. The result is illustrated in Figure 3, being the percentage comprised by the summing up of only the grades 4 and 5.

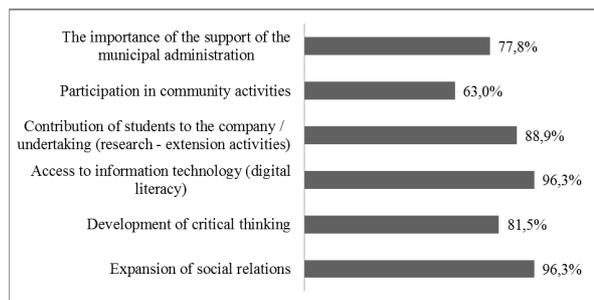


Figure 3. Political/democratic impact. Source: the authors

The main comments presented by the coordinators in relation to that item were:

“It contributes to the integration and socialization in our society.”

“Without support we don’t have the conditions of financial survival.”

“They contribute to social participation.”

“Currently the pole includes thirteen cities, it is acknowledged as offering quality courses, seriousness and responsibility from all those involved, educators and managers. The city hall administration must give support the poles without restrictions, so that the activities can be sustained with physical, human and structural resources.”

“We had a lot of problems with the bureaucracy of the Mantenedora in order to receive financial help to the pole.”

Still with the goal of analyzing those aspects relative to the political/democratic impact, other dissertating questions were presented to the coordinators. One of the questions asked information about the support by the city hall administration to the development of the activities at the poles. Twenty three answers were collected by the coordinators and the analysis of such answers lead to 4 central ideas, distributed according to the kinds of presented answers.

1. In 10 (ten) answers it is mentioned that the pole has the adequate conditions of logic and physical infrastructure, as well as the necessary conditions to sustain everyday activities. Such conditions are established and offered by the city hall and/or by means of an effective partnership between the state and the city administration.
2. In 7 (seven) answers it is said that the pole holds the necessary infrastructure and physical conditions and enough support for daily activities, but that it still has problems with the logical part, especially with the access to the Internet.
3. In 5 (five) answers it is said that the pole does not have an adequate logic and physical infrastructure, due to difficulties of investment by the city administration.
4. And there is 1 (one) answer that indicates the existence of problems with the legislation, because the city administration is only allowed to invest in basic education.

In the texts presented by the coordinators the case is mentioned that in a number of cities the headquarters of the pole was established by an action by the Secretaries for Regional Development (Secretarias de Desenvolvimento Regional), which is a specific structure in the Gov-

ernment of the state of Santa Catarina, but even so many of these poles end up having to resort to the support by the city administration for operational activities.

Another question aimed at learning what extension activities were being promoted by the staff at the pole. In this case 25 out of 27 coordinators presented their answers, and the analysis of those 25 answers, in addition to indicating the use of the pole in support activities inherent to the offered courses, also lead to 3 (three) central ideas that are part in the answers presented:

1. The execution of activities of fraternization during city holidays and commemorative dates among the pole staff, students and the community, and the carrying out of campaigns in the community, like the campaign to collect winter clothes, or to donate blood.
2. The use of the pole for talks and lectures, seminars and cultural and artistic activities, as: autographs events for new books, book fairs, selling of used books, conferences and study groups.
3. The use of the pole for the execution of extension courses, like courses of Libras, English, Spanish, the elaboration of projects, digital literacy/digital inclusion.

D. Analytical Category 4: Results of the courses

Under that analytical category according to the adopted classification criteria as expressed in Table 1, aspects related to the following issues are included: permanence and success versus course model; students' testimonies about the process of insertion; extension activities and courses with the participation of the students; the perceptions by the students and by the mantenedores.

An institution's experience with face-to-face courses that wants to offer courses in DE does not assure that it will present educational and didactic materials of quality by means of communication and information media. Each resource used, be it the Virtual Environment for Teaching and Learning (Ambiente Virtual de Ensino Aprendizagem) (AVEA), or printed material, videos, videoconference and others, has its own logic of conception, production, of language, and of use of time. The combined use of these materials needs to be harmonic and well-adjusted based on institutional plans and conceptual maps, and will carry the institution's conception of education.

Thus, with the aim of understanding which strategies and procedures were being perceived as efficient by the coordinators in terms of higher permanence levels of the students it was asked to the coordinators a positioning about one of the open questions. And the analysis of the 27 answers presented by the coordinators lead to 4 central ideas that integrate those answers:

1. That the composition of the educational material should privilege interactivity, and should include printed material, AVEA with insertion of videos, and video classes.
2. The interaction process must take into account that in addition to the use of asynchronous resources of the AVEA, like the use of the forum, and of synchronous activities of weekly videoconference or web conference with the presence of the students at the pole, there is also the presence of the teachers in face-to-face meetings with the students at the poles.

3. That the process of mediation is fundamental and the role of the tutors, in that sense, is decisive to show the benefits of the courses in the modality at a distance, in addition to the fast feedback offered to the students, both by tutors and teachers.
4. The presence of an adequate infrastructure at the pole, especially the computer labs, which must be well equipped and with a fast Internet available.

Other quotes present some aspects relating to the formation of study groups at the pole, the stimulus and organization of activities for the use of the library of the pole and the availability of the pole to the students on weekends. Next, some of the texts by the coordinators are presented.

"Videoconference, video classes; printed material; the visit of the teacher of the discipline at the pole; quick feedback by the tutors to the students; physical installations for the library."

"The printed material is a resource that helps in the permanence of the student, the performance of the tutors face-to-face and at a distance, the face-to-face meetings with the teachers of the partner IES, the quick feedback by the involved agents (course coordinator, teachers, tutors), the stimulus of the face-to-face tutors."

"The printed material is very important, it is what they most complain about when it is lacking, others are videos of the classes and, finally, videoconference."

"Motivation; support; follow up; organization and availability of equipment and materials of the pole for the students on work days and also on weekends and holidays."

"Videoconference, structure of the pole, didactic-pedagogical material, library, face-to-face classes, email exchange, devoted tutors."

"Videoconference, interaction with teachers, doubt shooting in chats with teachers. Face-to-face classes, one for each discipline. Video with obligatory attendance for the students to know each other and to promote their interaction."

"Study groups; conferences; printed material; face-to-face classes with the teachers."

"Integration among the different actors in the courses and the students of the poles; participation of the face-to-face tutors and students in the planning of the activities in the course; systematic evaluation of the course. Availability of materials as books, videos and others to help students. Promotion of seminars, study groups."

It was asked from the coordinators a report on the opinion of the students about the presence of the poles, as delivered in face-to-face meetings at the poles. All 27 answers hold only one central idea, that is, the pole offers the opportunity for people to make true their dream of attending a public and free university.

There are complements in some answers; in 5 (five) it is indicated that the presence of the pole helps to improve the quality of life and stimulates the economic, cultural and social development in the region, while in other 3 (three) answers one finds the information that the students are already in the work market and are grateful for the opportunity that the presence of the pole brought to their lives. When asked about testimonies by students that had unfavorable comments in relation to the presence of the

pole in the region, 22 coordinators gave a feedback, with the conclusion that there are no unfavorable opinions against the presence of the pole.

Some complementary arguments were used. One of them, in 5 (five) answers, reinforces the importance of increasing the number of courses offered, and in other 5 (five) answers another argument stresses the difficulties with logic and physical infrastructure that are still faced. In 3 (three) other answers one finds the indication that it is necessary to improve the work model adopted by the teachers and staff from the offering institution, in order to gain agility to solve the students' needs and, finally, there is one case that points at some sectors of society who are still not in favor to the offering of courses in that modality.

E. Analytical Category 5: Demographic data

Under that analytical category are included those aspects relative to the following points: number of courses; number of offering institutions at the pole; number of regular students; number of graduate students; extension at the pole; local economy. About the results from the presence of the face-to-face support pole, and considering only those poles, which had their coordinators participating in this research, the issues raised were the number of offering institutions that use the pole, the number of courses offered, the number of enrolled students, and the number of students who have already concluded their courses. The data on these issues are charted and the information is illustrated on Figures 4, 5, 6 and 7, bellow.

The presence of different institutions offering courses at the same pole implies a diversity of models and of modes to manage the courses, with a consequent increase in the complexity of the work to be done by the coordinator of the pole in face of aspects like the management model of the pole, of the teams, of infrastructure and of the institutional political relations to be established. That is expressed in the majority of the poles, considering that there is only 1 pole in which there is just one offering institution working, while one finds 7 poles with 2 offering institutions, 8 poles with 3 offering institutions, 7 poles with 4 institutions, 2 poles with 5 institutions, 1 pole with 6 institutions and finally, one other pole with 7 institutions.

Such a complexity increases as each institution offers more than one course, as one can see on Figure 5, with an average offer of 2 to 3 courses per institution.

The increase in the number of enrollments is evident, as illustrated on Figure 6. According to data presented by part of the coordinators, there are 7,845 regularly enrolled students at 191 courses that are being offered at the 27 poles researched, thus establishing an average of 41 students per course. And as a result, according to the coordinators, 2,182 students have finished their courses along these 4 years of existence of the poles, as illustrated on Figure 7.

One other information that calls attention in the answers delivered by part of the coordinators is that 22 responding poles did indicate that they take students from an average of 15 cities from the region in which the pole is installed, being that the smaller number was of 9 cities sending students to one pole, while the larger was of 30 cities sending students to the region's pole. There are cases in a different situation, as those poles in the North region of the country, which in addition to receiving students from the urban centers close to the pole also receive students from the Indian communities around.

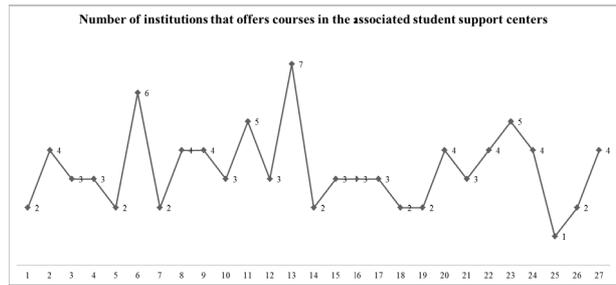


Figure 4. Number of institutions offering courses at the pole. Source: the authors

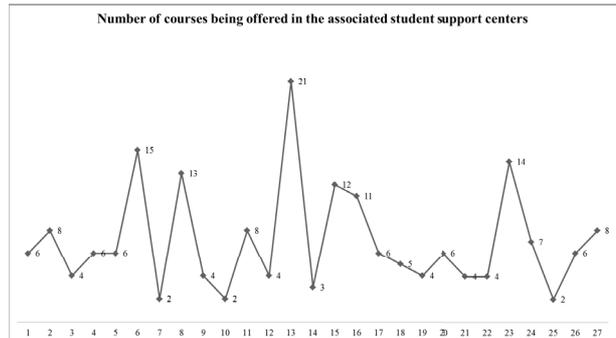


Figure 5. Number of courses offered at the pole. Source: the authors

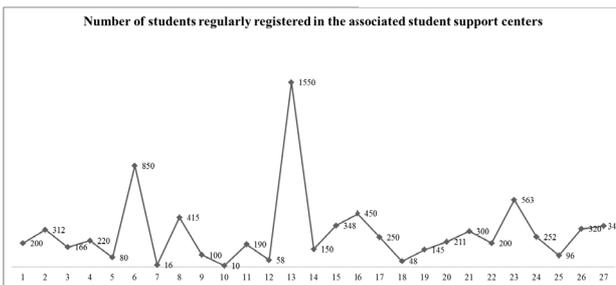


Figure 6. Results from the charting of the number of regular students at the pole. Source: the authors

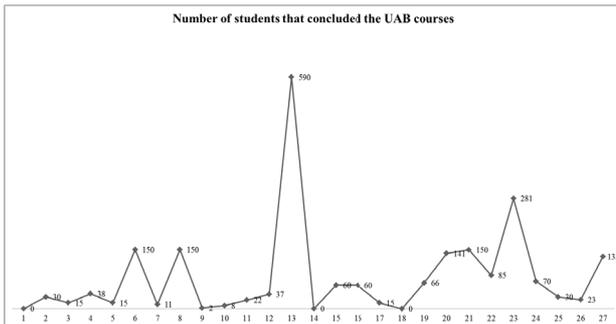


Figure 7. Results from the charting of the number that have already finished their courses at the pole. Source: the authors

These 22 coordinators presented, in addition, some comments in an open space in the questionnaire. When analyzing their texts 2 central ideas in the answers come to the foreground:

1. Divergence of information on the process of requiring courses at the pole, that is, the coordinator of the pole has relevant doubts about the model to be followed and complains from the difficulties to open new courses.

2. There is a complaint in relation to how the evaluation from CAPES is being made, and about the strictness leading to the suspension of courses at some poles. The complaint claims that such a situation was established without a counterpart from both MEC and the offering institutions.

IV. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

With the goal of suggesting a series of requirements to be analyzed, and which approach essential aspects for a face-to-face support pole of quality, the present work made evident issues that can represent the perception by the managers and local agents (coordinators, tutors, administrative and city representatives) about the social effects of UAB and the reflexes of the insertion of DE in the cities.

The UAB face-to-face support pole is a fundamental element in the structure of the DE program as it constitutes an operational extension of the IPES connected to the system at the student's city or at its region. It is at the pole that face-to-face meetings occur, as well as the following up and guidance of the students, the lab practices and face-to-face evaluations. For the UAB Program currently linked to CAPES/MEC it is necessary that each support pole becomes able to meet a number of references of quality to allow the adjustment and composition of a model of infrastructure and of management, which takes into account those characteristics for the full development of the activities of courses at a distance.

For the offering institutions it is necessary for the face-to-face support pole to sustain a set of elements that make possible the adjustment and composition of a model of infrastructure and of management, which takes into account the characteristics of the course to be offered at the pole's region, with a view to assure the integral development of the activities of the course and the offering of adequate services to the students.

The results from the analyses of the researched categories make evident and corroborate the initial idea when one thinks of DE, that is, more autonomy and time and space flexibility for the student, even considering that pedagogical and didactic autonomy is still a challenge for the modality of education at a distance. Moreover, the permanence of the student in the course depends on a series of factors, which have been a research object for those researchers in DE. In the case at issue, one tried to evaluate how the conditions of infrastructure and the installations at the pole bring benefits to the students and the community by means of stimulating entrepreneurship, promoting digital inclusion and digital literacy, which were pointed as some of the social effects of UAB and of DE at the analyzed cities.

In this study one acknowledges that the experience with face-to-face courses does not assure for an institution that wants to offer courses at a distance the quality of didactic and educational materials to be delivered to the students by means of different communication and information media. Each course has its own logic of conception, production, of language, and of use of time. The value is in the combined use of these materials, and in the adjustment following the instructional plans and conceptual maps that shall translate the concept of education from the institution involved.

It becomes evident that the shared use of the pole by the IPES creates a democratic and plural space for experiences of formation, which, on the one hand reflects the complexity in the management model of the pole and its offerings, but that also indicates the weaknesses of conception and execution of the models of the offered courses, be it in the composition of the learning activities and availability of evaluative and educational material, be it in the activities of interaction and mediation and feedback applied.

In addition, it was possible to make evident that in a number of cities, in spite of the fact that the program has been functioning for the last 4 years, the conditions of logic and physical infrastructure were still not assured, especially those conditions to access the fast Internet, which constitutes a fundamental tool for the efficient development of the process of interaction and interactivity, and of mediation and feedback to the students.

One other point to be stressed is the fact that the face-to-face support pole has expanded its range of execution and has become more than a strategic center to support capacitation, formation and specialization at higher education level; it has also become a reference center for the execution of complementary formation of citizens by means of short term extension courses, and social, cultural and artistic activities. From that one can conclude that the support and maintenance and improvement of the conditions at the pole, as well as the continuity in the offering of courses reflects directly in the quality of life of the population, and as result has a political and social impact, thus contributing for a consolidation of democracy and citizenship, an effect not foreseen when the program was constituted.

However, from the analysis of the case at issue, that is, the reflex from the implantation of the face-to-face support poles on its immediate surroundings – city and/or region – it is possible to infer that in offering courses at a distance some issues arise – are the programs of distance education necessary due to the lack of capacity by the current educational infrastructure to meet the demand? Or are the students looking for more flexible courses due to the difficulty to enter the more traditional course models? Or, still, are the courses at a distance destined to only meet the needs of minority representatives, or adults who did not have the opportunity to attend the so called conventional education?

Such questioning arises curiosity and stimulates one to proceed with the research, not only with the coordinators of the poles, but trying also to reach the other agents, especially those students who finished the first courses, and who are now being tested by the work market, and whose success or failure may function as a measure for the success or failure of the UAB system itself.

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