

Brazil—Commentary



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The Brazilian population of 210 million people are concentrated along the coast, in the northeast, south and southeast regions. In the countryside, we find a population where information, information and communication technologies, and education are harder to access. Yet, from 2000 to 2014 the number of students in higher education rose from 2.6 million to 7.8 million. These numbers were divided between on campus courses (presencialmente) with 83% of enrollments, and open and distance learning (ODL) with 17%. The majority of ODL courses were offered by the private sector. Still, public sector ODL achieved an enrollment growth of 93.9% between 2005 and 2009. This decreased to 19% for the following five years. The rise and fall in public sector ODL enrollments is connected to Open University of Brazil system (Universidade Aberta do Brasil or UAB), whose importance is the subject of this commentary.

The UAB system was created in 2006 to connect public institutions of higher education with state and municipal delegates, and the federal government. Specifically, the goal was to provide higher education for public teachers in regions not served by traditional institutions. The UAB is also responsible for the National Public Administration Training Program, offering undergraduate courses in public administration and specializations in public management and public health. In the strictest sense, UAB is not a conventional higher education institution, nor a ODE institution. Rather it is a system that regulates student entrance and admissions, and copyrights instructional materials. The “open” in the name of UAB comes from the extensive range of students and geography covered, and from the intention of its’ creators.

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The Coordinator for the Improvement of Higher Education (CAPES) is the authority that funds, regulates and manages the courses offered by higher education institutions at in person (presencial) support centers (SPCs). Since 2007, the Coordinator for the Improvement of Higher Education had its budget tripled and responsibilities expanded to include teacher training. This initiative was divided into two directories: Basic Education and Distance Education.

Distance Education directories have had two phases. In the first, from 2005–2011, the UAB system was created according to rules of the National Plan for Teacher Training and the Joint Action Plan for teacher training support. At the time, a collegial system of management was created, including regional and area forums. The management was composed of the first UAB teachers and managers. The second phase was from 2011 to 2016. By that time there were over 170 000 enrollments within the UAB system. There was also a movement to evaluate public higher education institutions, and support centers, leading to a replacement of collegial management with a group of specialists.

The UAB emerged from traditional institutions that already offered the same course from a face-to-face mode to an ODL format. The public Brazilian ODL mode is more like a blended format, where 30% of activities, especially assessments and evaluations take place at support centers. Support centers are a key part of public ODL in Brazil. The support centers are partly based on the system at the Spanish national DE institution, the Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia. The physical space of the support center is a mix of popular culture and scientific knowledge for a digital world. Their characteristics follow the dual nature of coast and countryside that is the basis of ODL in Brazil. Small locations, far from the coast, have support centers with more cultural activities, educational materials and interaction with local education groups. Support centers in medium sized towns and cities are a cradle of new or hybrid course materials. These support centers are meeting points where technological tools and resources for general teacher training are available. In big cities, support centers have digital infrastructure and materials. The combination of public institutions of higher education and support centers results in a kaleidoscope system, where social interests and federal policies can combine to foster digital culture and enrich knowledge.

The UAB system budget is oriented to supporting this model. However, the government funding model affects autonomy, as the UAB system is based on grants and benefits not on a permanent budget. At one point recently, the UAB System went for one and a half years without monies as the national budget was not passed on university funding. Many new educational program offerings had to be suspended. Further, the UAB system is limited in being able to expand its programs for possible funding sources. For example, legislation does not allow for payment benefits to foreign citizens. So UAB system initiatives are limited to national programs and is restricted from expanding into Africa among other places. Moreover, UAB was affected by a new public policy that focused on technical training at the high school level. This divided the ODL budget. Instead of seeing an expansion of funding, it was cut by 75% when the Coordinator for the Improvement of Higher Education budget was announced in 2015.

Finally, another challenge for public ODL in Brazil is still infrastructure: internet speed is usually very low in public institutions, when there is connectivity at all. The technology and computer science sectors, as well as many universities and libraries are not yet prepared for digital activities that, outside their walls, grows exponentially. In general, we find ourselves at a time when it is difficult to know whether the public ODL will continue to receive the investment needed for its growth. It should be noted that despite all this, the UAB system has a dropout rate that is ten percent lower than private sector distance education. Public ODL in Brazil is a teaching and delivery mode that can provide quality, flexible educational programs at scale for a knowledge society.

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