

# **Perspectives and uncertainties: Challenges and achievements of the *Lato sensu* distance learning program at a University in the Brazilian Amazon**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Distance-learning graduate programs go beyond the limits of academic training, restricted to obtaining a degree. Challenges and overcoming occur, not only in the search for qualification, for a career plan and following the company's remuneration policy, but also due to the physical distance from major teaching centers. The great proposal is to supplant the frontiers of knowledge, in places where there is immense biodiversity, in contrast to geographical isolation. The objective of the study is to present the challenges and perspectives of the lato sensu graduate program at a University of the Brazilian Amazon, in the Municipal Public Management course in the state of Rondônia. The methodology used was that of review, as it seeks to describe, analyze and discuss scientific and technological knowledge already published. The review is basic and, it is expected that it will serve as support for scientific research and also, as support for theoretical reference. The course presented as a result works aimed at the better performance of the Management of the Municipalities of Rondônia. The research work developed by the students represents a local reality diagnosed with the search for managerially planned solutions.*

Keywords: Post-Graduation. University Management. Municipal Public Management. Qualification. Amazon.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Despite the colossal physical distances between cities in the Amazon Region, the vigorous developmental process brought with it the necessary changes to bring these spaces together, albeit virtually. Distance Education (EaD) has currently become a viable tool for public policies aimed at offering courses, seeking to reach people who live in remote regions of the Amazon, and have difficult access to education.

Thus, the EaD, presents itself as the institutional tool to enable the offerings of undergraduate courses and specialization *lato sensu*. This option often represents the only opportunity for students from these remote locations to join a free and quality higher education course.

Due to the geographic isolation of most municipalities in the Amazon Region, whose access is often restricted, and which have enormous barriers to be overcome, such as economic and social, they often prevent the population from enjoying citizens' rights, such as education. In this context, the Federal University of Rondônia (UNIR), through the Directorate of Distance Education (DIREDD), offers eight

municipalities in the state, centers for undergraduate courses and *lato sensu* specialization in the distance modality.

In this sense, the article proposes to describe, the challenges and perspectives of the distance education program at the level of specialization *lato sensu*, in a University of the Brazilian Amazon. The study was carried out at the Federal University of Rondônia, through the experience of implementing the Municipal Public Administration course.

Therefore, the purpose of this article is to present the challenges and perspectives of the *lato sensu* graduate program at a University of the Brazilian Amazon. To achieve this objective, it is necessary to: (1) Analyze the difficulties encountered in carrying out the *lato sensu* specialization course; (2) Understand the difficulties and solutions most encountered by students enrolled in the course; (3) Know the results obtained by the course object of study.

### 1.1 Contextualization

Distance learning courses in the National Public Administration Training Program (PNAP) were approved by the Superior Council of the Federal University of Rondônia (UNIR, 2010). Through the selection process, the Municipal Public Management course was initiated, covering, among others, in the capital and municipalities, in order to meet a repressed demand, even in regions of more difficult access, where the population craves for qualification opportunities.

The Municipal Public Management course has the following training in its structure: a course coordinator, tutoring coordinator, distance tutors and classroom tutors. To promote the administrative and didactic-pedagogical part of the course, DIREC/UNIR has the figure of the general director and postgraduate coordinator, whose main function is to manage and provide resources that enable the development of distance courses.

The course under study was implemented in eight municipalities in Rondônia, including the capital, Porto Velho, which, even though the public university offering on-site courses is available, also chose to offer the course, providing opportunities for improvement in this area.

### 1.2 Course structure

The postgraduate course in Municipal Public Management was created through Resolution no. 246/CONSEA (UNIR, 2010), with single entry, which started in 2012 in some centers and 2013 in others. Due to the lack of resources, it was forced to stop his activities in 2013, resuming in mid-2014. The course was divided into 14 modules with a proposed duration of fifteen months. To be approved, the student needed a minimum of 70%.

In order to reduce dropouts and increase the success rate, it was suggested to encourage student rescue activities. In these new activities, under the title of Repercurso, the student could recover up to two subjects. These disciplines were offered based on new activities, new assessments and special monitoring by tutors and coordinators. Thus, there was a higher rate of success in the course.

The curricular structure of the course consisted of 420 hours. 80% of this workload was carried out on a virtual basis and 20% with face-to-face classes. There were 210 hours of the so-called Basic Core and 210 hours of the Macro Management System for Public Systems, whose initial proposal would not exceed

15 months from the beginning. In order to develop the content, printed support texts, a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), face-to-face meetings and a tutoring system were used.

The virtual classes took place through the Online Learning System (MOODLE). The face-to-face classes took place at the hubs on Friday (evening) and Saturday (evening and morning). At the centers there was a technical and pedagogical infrastructure, a computer lab, a library for face-to-face activities and as a support base for studies.

The objective of the Basic Module was to provide the student with an awareness of the current government policy, placing it in the transition that has been taking, over the past few years, from a Managerial State to a Necessary State. This framework allowed students to better understand. Throughout the Specific Module, the different actions and programs implemented by the current public administration were studied.

### 1.3 Poles

The project of the course on screen, foreseen for each pole of the interior and capital, 50 vacancies, offered to society in general. The municipalities covered were Ariquemes, Buritis, Chupinguaia, Nova Mamoré, Porto Velho, Ji-Paraná and Rolim de Moura. Table 1 provides information on the distance between them and the capital, in addition to the demographic density of each municipality.

The poles were chosen, in principle, in the same municipalities where there are campuses at the Federal University of Rondônia, and where there was a partnership with the municipal governments. As can be seen, many of the centers have extremely low demographic density, which makes access to higher education and even more specialization courses more difficult, such as the municipalities of Buritis and Chupinguaia. Figure 1 shows the poles and their distribution in the state.

Figure 1- DIRED's poles of action in the State of Rondônia



Source: DIREDD (2020)

Owing to the distance and pole access, teachers' visits were periodic, but not constant. The locomotion difficulties of the Amazonian population, in general, present precarious means of inter-municipal transport, in addition to a shortage of specialized professionals in these small localities in the Amazon. In this way, the course proposal, contributes to reduce the limitation of the educational sector and to reduce the deficit in the intellectual development of the population with technological distance from such municipalities with the large centers.

Table 1. Poles of the Municipal Public Management course

<b>POLES</b>	<b>Distance from Capital</b>	<b>Population (estimated in 2019)</b>	<b>Demographic density (hab / km<sup>2</sup>)</b>
Ariquemes	203 km	107,863	24.4
Buritis	319 km	39,654	12.1
Chupinguaia	660 km	11,182	2.1
Jí-Paraná	378 km	128,969	16.9
Nova Mamoré	280 km	22,546	2.2
Porto Velho	-	529,544	15.5
Rolim de Moura	480 km	55,058	37.6

Source: IBGE (2019)

Thus, for a good development of the course, it was necessary to guarantee access to computers connected to the internet, with a minimally satisfactory link that would allow the upload and download of files. This has become one of the main challenges to be overcome. With this kit it is possible to access the internet at a nominal speed of 512kbps. However, due to climatic factors characteristic of the region, such as large amounts of clouds and frequent rains, the actual speed achieved is around 100kbps (LUCENA, 2012).

## 2. Theoretical Reference

*Lato sensu* postgraduate courses, or *lato sensu* specialization courses, are no longer considered free, that is, independent of authorization to operate by the Ministry of Education and Sport (MEC). With Opinion no. 908/98 (Brazil, 1998) and Resolution no. 3 (Brazil, 1999) of the Higher Education Chamber of the National Education Council, the conditions for the validity of certificates for on-site specialization courses were established, and made the regulation of such courses in the distance modality necessary.

### 2.1 Distance mode

The flexibilization of teaching with the insertion of the distance modality presents an increasing demand, considering the educational challenges, which is reflected in initiatives and incentives on the part of the public administration, especially in the Amazon Region, since there is difficulty in displacement, in

the face of great distances to be covered. Despite the availability of appropriate technological resources, this modality has been meeting the demand for undergraduate and specialization courses.

As proposed by Moore and Kearsley (2007), it is in Distance Education that the relationships between students and teachers are analyzed, as it is not limited to the barrier imposed by space and time, since both, teacher and student, are, as a rule, in different places, during the teaching-learning process, generating benefits that bring greater flexibility to the student in terms of time and place of study.

Lima (2000) corroborates this thought and adds that Distance Education is the trend that is unfolding on the horizon and demonstrates that distance education will consolidate itself as the most viable alternative for the democratization of knowledge. In turn, Reis (2003) understands that more than technology in distance education is needed so that it can develop an educational environment. For the author, it is important that there is interaction, since technological advances provide better possibilities in the educational context, however, access to information is not a sufficient cause for the acquisition of knowledge.

Therefore, with the proposal to serve the significant portion of the local population, the distance modality seeks to promote inclusion through democratization of opportunities and sequence of studies, meeting public policies to provide quality training to work in the public sector, whose investment has been implemented through the Open University of Brazil (UaB) (CAPES Foundation, 2020), which is a program to support public higher education institutions, together with the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES), which is a foundation linked to the MEC, in addition to the Federal University of Rondônia (UNIR).

Knowledge is social and its creation and distribution are part of the creation activities of particular groups of people. The group thus formed provides the instruments so that the knowledge generated can be disseminated through socially created ways, adopted and used in specific social contexts (LIBÂNEO, 2002).

In turn, Ivanoff (2010) points out the difficulties inherent in the students' first contacts with the new teaching modality, and how its use in an educational process represents a real challenge in the construction of knowledge. However, the assimilation of this new approach happens naturally and students gradually get used to it and take advantage of the opportunity to enhance their abilities. (LITTO; FORMIGA, 2009).

## **2.2. Higher Education in the Brazilian Amazon**

At the beginning of the 60s of the 20th century, Higher Education in Brazil was limited exclusively to capitals and very few inland cities. Thus, access to higher education for people from the countryside was restricted (ESTRADA, 2000). This development model, concentrated the thinking populations in the capitals and metropolises, accentuating the rural exodus and the social problems arising from them.

However, the activities of university institutions need to analyze the context in which they operate and consider regional interests, challenges and particularities. The needs to respond to the recognition process of the Amazon Region, in a way that occupies the various regional gaps, go through the constant growth of the social and quality demands of higher education in terms of professional, intellectual, technical and political training opportunities (VACA et al., 2007).

In turn, the cities of the interior, according to the authors, far from these poles of knowledge, were until recently, at the mercy of knowledge, which was destined for the privileged few. The International Conference on Higher Education in the Amazon, at the beginning of the 21st century, found that in the Amazon region there was still a significant brain drain both abroad and to more developed regions of the countries.

It is observed that the Federal Universities of the Amazon Region have about 30 years of creation, with the exception of the Federal University of Amazonas, whose conception is from 1909 (UFAM, 2020) and UFPA founded in 1957 (UFPA, 2020), being the oldest in the Region, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2 - Federal Universities in the Amazon Region

Federative Unit	Name	Acronym	Year of creation
Acre	Federal University of Acre	UFAC	1974
Amapá	Federal University of Amapá	UNIFAP	1990
Amazonas	Federal University of Amazonas	UFAM	1909
Pará	Federal Rural University of Amazônia	UFRA	2002
	Federal University of Pará	UFPA	1957
	Federal University of Oeste do Pará	UFOPA	2009
	Federal University of Southeast Pará	UNIFESSPA	2013
Rondônia	Federal University of Rondônia	UNIR	1982
Roraima	Federal University of Roraima	UFRR	1989
Tocantins	Federal University of Tocantins	UFT	1990
	Federal University of Northern Tocantins	UFNT	2019

Source: Brasil (2020)

The Brazilian Amazon Region has only 11 Federal Universities, in contrast to other regions. In brief comparison, only the state of Minas Gerais has the same number of institutions as the entire Brazilian Northern Region, followed by the state of Rio Grande do Sul, with 7 institutions and Bahia with six. This shows how much it is necessary to internalize higher education in Brazil.

### 2.3 The Federal University of Rondônia

‘The Federal University of Rondônia Foundation (UNIR) is a university in the west of the Brazilian Amazon Region. was created in 1982 by Law No. 7011 (BRASIL, 1982). It has eight *campi*, located in the municipalities of Ariquemes, Cacoal, Guajará-Mirim, Ji-Paraná, Porto Velho, Presidente Médici, Rolim de

Moura and Vilhena. Its administrative headquarters are located in the capital, in Porto Velho, where the Rectorry and pro-rectories are established (UNIR, 2020).

Currently, it has 56 undergraduate courses, 18 masters and three doctorate courses, all in person. 8874 students are enrolled in the undergraduate program and 581 in the *lato sensu* graduate program.

#### **2.4 About the Distance Education Directorate**

The Directorate of Distance Education (DIREDD) is a supplementary department of UNIR, therefore being, the body that makes University Management, whose objective is to offer initial and continued training in undergraduate and graduate courses for municipalities where there are hubs in the State from Rondônia. These courses are promoted in the distance mode and have the support of a trained and well-structured team.

To reduce the difficulties inherent to the Amazon region, DIREDD adapted traditional pedagogical models that, according to Behar (2009, p. 2), represent a teaching/learning relationship. This structure unites didactic-pedagogical support and students; technological and logistical solutions to make the offer of courses and support for distance learning students viable.

For distance courses to be viable, support from the local city hall is required. The centers have a secretary, a computer lab, with computers and a library. To accompany the student, there is the coordinator of on-site tutors. Support for remote activities is carried out through AVA, where a virtual classroom was created for each discipline, containing didactic material, fixation and assessment activities, file repository and space for viewing notes.

### **3 Methodology**

The methodology used was that of review, as it seeks to describe, analyze and discuss scientific and technological knowledge already published. The review is basic, it is expected that it will serve as support for scientific research and, also, as a theoretical reference support for future works.

The methodological procedures adopted in this research were bibliographic review and the research is classified as qualitative, which according to Strauss and Corbin (2008), is used in a non-mathematical process of interpretation: data (from sources such as interviews, observations and documents), procedures (which include data reduction, elaboration of categories and definition of the relationship between these categories) and reports (verbal or written).

The characteristics of a research, according to Prodanov and Freitas (2013), vary according to the nature, approach, purposes, technical procedures, sample and data collection instruments. Thus, this research fits into the typologies mentioned in Chart 1, with emphasis on the data collection instruments, which are concerned with controlling the quality of the data and the process used to obtain it.

Chart 1 - Research typology

Feature Type Description	Feature Type Description	Feature Type Description
Kind	Basic	Basic research seeks to generate knowledge for practical application and aimed at solving problems that contain previously defined objectives. These goals can be medium or short term in scope.
Approach	Qualitative	Qualitative research considers that everything can be quantified, which means translating into numbers, opinions and information to classify and analyze them
Purposes	Exploratory	It is exploratory, since it used the use of bibliographic and documentary tools in order to analyze the perspectives and uncertainties of Distance Education in the Amazon Region.
Technical procedures	Bibliographic research	The bibliographic research supported the data collection to satisfy the proposed objectives.
Data collection instruments	Observation	It is concerned with controlling the quality of the data and the process used to obtain it.

Source: Adapted from Prodanov and Freitas (2013), Vergara (2004), Gil (2002), Marconi (2003) and Malhotra (2001).

#### 4. DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

The construction of new knowledge, capable of transforming society with trained managers, is only one of the goals of those who choose this modality. According to Gil (2002), “analysis aims to organize and summarize the data in a way that allows the provision of an answer to the proposed problem”. The interpretation, on the other hand, aims to search for the broader meaning of the answers, which is done through its connection with others previously obtained.

In spite of all the adversities found for the implantation and continuity of the course, having as a direct consequence the students' permanence in the classes, bringing many dropouts along the way, caused sometimes by the paralyzes of the course, sometimes by the distance, the course presented in its final stretch, a rate of achievement in the different centers, considered regular, by DIREDD, since it was the first time that there was a distance course, the deadline for its completion was several times postponed.

Such difficulties resulted in a significant percentage of dropouts, as shown in Chart 2, which shows the number of students enrolled by pole. The number of students who completed all 14 subjects of the course is listed below.



In the next column, the number of students who presented the Course Completion Work, and finally the achievement rate by pole.

Chart 2 - Utilization rate by pole

POLOS	Enrolled Students	Concluding Repercurso	Graduating Students	Utilization rate
Porto Velho	48	9	22	46%
Ariquemes	49	5	25	51%
Nova Mamoré	50	1	18	36%
Jí-Paraná	52	7	28	54%
Buritis	17	0	01	6%
Rolim de Moura	49	5	17	35%
Chupinguaia	10	1	02	20%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>275</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>113</b>	<b>47%</b>

Source: Prepared by the authors based on DIREDD data (2019)

It is possible to observe that there was an average of 41% of students who were successful in completing the course. 350 places were offered, and only 113 managed to complete the course. With a keen look, it can be seen that the municipalities of Buritis and Chupinguaia were the ones with the lowest number of graduating students. These two cities are outside of BR 364, a highway that connects the state of Rondônia with the rest of the country, and that in these cities, there are more problems related to the continuous supply of energy and internet connection.

Of the enrolled students, 28 made use of the institutional tool called **Repercurso**, and were included in the list of graduates. Having overcome these barriers, it was then possible to conclude the specialization of the *lato sensu* course in Municipal Public Management. On the other hand, the course presented as results scientific articles aimed at the better performance of the Management of the Municipalities of Rondônia, works that can easily be implemented, since the researches developed by the students with teaching guidance represent a local reality diagnosed with the search for solutions managerially planned.

## 5. Final Considerations

The *lato sensu* course in Municipal Public Management was offered in seven municipalities in the state of Rondônia, through DIREDD, with face-to-face support, including the capital Porto Velho. 350 vacancies were offered in the distance modality, preferably for civil servants, also counting on vacancies for the

community. Poles municipalities had partnerships with local city halls, and attracted students from adjacent locations.

Initially the students had difficulty and had to adapt to the new modality, and for that, there was a period of adaptation. However, the difficulties encountered throughout the course did not mischaracterized from the pioneering nature of this proposal for the integration of distance learning, and provided the great diversity of the target audience, which, in their majority, are students from distant locations.

From the perspective based on the social, political and economic reality of the society in which they live and operate, a picture of dropouts was presented, which affected the desired levels of success. Allied to this, the failures compromised the permanence of the target audience in the virtual classrooms. To reverse this situation, preventive measures were adopted, aiming to stop evasion, in order to motivate students to rethink their role in the society to which it is inserted. The pedagogical decisions made were to make the student aware of his role as an active subject and an opinion maker. And the conclusion of the course research was worked together with them, which were aligned with their professional profile.

Another difficulty was the lack of continuous internet at the poles. This point is still being analyzed by management, for the next courses, with quality virtual access. Thus, specific objective 1 was successfully achieved, since the difficulties encountered in carrying out the *lato sensu* specialization course were analyzed. From then on, it was possible to verify the rate of success of the course. One hundred and thirteen students completed and defended the Course Conclusion Papers, making up an index of 41% of the total enrolled students. Despite the fact that the result is below expectations, the strategic role played by UNIR, in the municipalities and adjacent region, increased its institutional commitment with regard to raising the levels of success of these courses, together with the Higher Education Systems.

In summary, it is possible to see that the scenario has been transformed, with the innovation of this teaching modality, bringing education closer to the more distant regions and with low demographic density. Therefore, specific objective 2, Verifying if there was a change in the initial scenario with the implementation of the studied course, was positive.

To meet the specific objective 3 to know the results obtained by the course object of study, it was through studies carried out for the elaboration of the Course Conclusion Works, that the proposals for solutions for the involved municipalities were observed bringing change to the initial environment.

Knowing the latent problems and difficulties is important, since from then on, it is possible to see an evolution and improvements in the situation. With updated data, it becomes possible to seek from the Federal and Municipal Government and the private initiative, programs that encourage the change in the realities of these locations, removing obstacles and fostering trends in order to reduce challenges and prospect prospects from postgraduate courses *lato sensu* graduation in the state of Rondônia.

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