

GO THE DISTANCE OR KEEP YOUR DISTANCE? CHALLENGES FOR THE EMERGENCY REMOTE EDUCATION IN A BRAZILIAN STATE UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we discuss the impacts of the pandemic generated by COVID-19 on Brazilian Higher Education, specifically at a State University of Bahia, Brazil. To do so, we present a brief contextualization of the progress of the pandemic in Brazil, in the state of Bahia and in the region where the University is located. We also present the laws and regulations elaborated by different governmental bodies, especially the Ministry of Education, for the continuation of classes, in face-to-face undergraduate courses, by remote means. Despite the initial emphasis of these regulations on the use of Digital Information and Communication Technologies, later there was a flexibility regarding the means for offering the remote classes. As for the case of the University discussed here, the continuation of undergraduate courses' classes interrupted by the pandemic, via the Emergency Remote Education, was approved on July 9th. We focus specifically on the outline of the student digital inclusion program, which provides scholarships for the acquisition of equipment, internet services and transportation. The results show that the resources allocated to this plan are insufficient, given the socioeconomic low-profile of the students. In addition, many of them live in locations with insufficient or no internet available, as well as are working and/or taking care of people full-time during the pandemic. Thus, the guarantee of access of students to the Emergency Remote Education, as well as the quality of this Education, may not be ensured through this plan.

Keywords: *COVID-19, Brazilian Higher Education, State Universities of Bahia, Distance Education, Emergency Remote Education*

INTRODUCTION

According to the Brazilian Press Consortium [1], on September 2nd, Brazil has reached 4,001,422 cases of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). The total amount of deaths from the disease thus reached 123,899. In conformity to the data collected until 8 pm, the average number of deaths per day in the last seven days is 878, maintaining a certain stability in these figures, even though with such high numbers. At the time, Brazil presented a rate of 59.1 deaths per 100 thousand inhabitants, while the United States, which presented the highest absolute number of deaths, and the United Kingdom, both ahead of Brazil in the pandemic (that is,

they started to suffer from the problem before), presented 56.8 and 62.6 deaths for every 100 thousand inhabitants, respectively.

Data [2] collected until August 31st indicated that 256,727 cases of COVID-19 were registered in the state of Bahia, and that cases were reported in 415 of the 417 (99.5%) municipalities of the state. The same data indicated an increase of 39,612 cases in the previous fortnight. On August 31st, there were 10,633 active cases in the state, 20% lower than the 13,459 active cases observed on August 17th. It was also verified that on August 31st the total amount of deaths from COVID-19 in Bahia was 5,397, 922 more than the previous fortnight. The lethality rate was around 2.1%. The evolution of the number of cases in the state is shown in Figure 1.

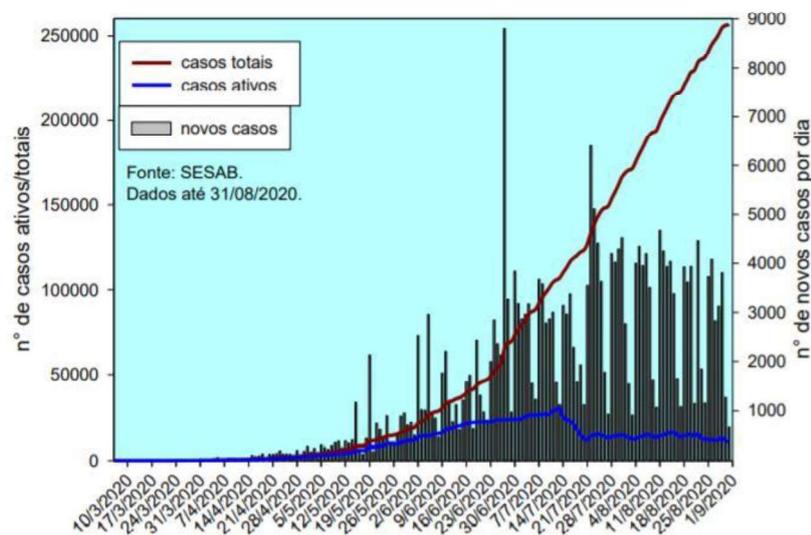


Figure 1 – COVID-19 total and active cases in Bahia until August 31st

It can be observed, besides an almost linear growth in the total amount of cases, a slight tendency of deceleration, which is not greater due to the maintenance of the appearance of new cases in the municipalities of the interior. This reinforces the necessity of attention with the spread of COVID-19 in the rural regions of the state. In order to provide a better understanding of the context of COVID-19 in the region of Bahia where the State University is located, whose case we are discussing in this paper, we are going to present data [2] on Itapetinga, Jequié and Vitória da Conquista, municipalities in which the three *campi* are situated.

In the beginning of September, there was a sharp drop in the number of both active cases and new cases reported per day in Jequié. Data indicate this as part of a trend of continuity of reduction in the coming days, although not so sharply. It is also necessary to observe the progress of the next fortnight to confirm this trend. If the reduction of cases takes place, this indicates a less alarming scenario from then on. However, it is noteworthy that an average of more than 30 new cases per day and a total of near 900 active cases are still not reassuring. On the

other hand, there is a trend of growth in the amount of active cases and also of new cases registered per day in Itapetinga and especially in Vitória da Conquista. Actually, in these two municipalities, there has been no consistent fall either in the amount of active cases, or in the amount of new cases registered per day.

LEGISLATION AND REGULATIONS ON HIGHER EDUCATION IN PANDEMIC TIMES

Facing this pandemic scenario, different instances of Brazilian Federal Government, especially the Ministry of Education, began to elaborate regulations in order to enable the classes' continuity in face-to-face courses of Higher Education. On March 17th, the Ministry of Education [3] authorized the didactic transposition of face-to-face academic activities of undergraduate courses to remote academic activities. Such activities would be mediated by Digital Information and Communication Technologies (DICT's).

On April 28th, a Report of the National Council of Education [4] is published, which suggests a series of flexibilities for the didactic transposition of face-to-face to remote classes. Differently from the previous documents, this Report stated that these remote pedagogical activities could be “mediated or not by digital technologies”. This same document also offered three options for resuming the interrupted academic activities due to the pandemic. The first would be to resume the semester in face-to-face activities starting at the end of the emergency period. The second would be to blend face-to-face and remote activities (and thus extending the daily timetable), also starting at the end of the emergency period.

A special defense of the third option, to carry out the remote activities, for as long as sanitary restrictions persist, was presented. The endeavor of avoiding students' academic regression and school dropouts, as well as the already common presence of DICT's both in face-to-face and in Distance Education [*Educação à Distância - EaD*], were pointed out as reasons for such an option. Consonant with the Report of April 28th, the Ministry of Education [5], on June 16th, authorized the replacement of face-to-face courses by educational activities, which could rely on DICT's or “other conventional means”, and also the extension of the period of exceptionality, under which such rules will be in force, until December 31st 2020.

In addition, since 1996, the Distance Education expansion, especially in the private sector, is a project sustained by the Brazilian State. Accordingly, in 2018, this kind of education accounted for 40% of the total of the 3,445,935 newcomers in 2018 in Higher Education and, since 2008, the increase in the share of the enrollments in Distance Education courses among the total of enrollments in Higher Education surpassed 100% [4]. Regulations for this kind of education were established in the Federal Law of December 20th, 1996 [6], in which the Public Power is encouraged to develop and disseminate the online learning at all modalities and levels of education, though only institutions accredited by the

Union can provide this kind of education. Finally, in ordinance of December 6th, 2019, the Ministry of Education [7] increases the limit of online classes in face-to-face undergraduate courses from 20% to 40% of the courses' total academic load. The regulation establishes that the Distance Education modality should develop teaching/learning processes and methods mediated by DICT's.

As can be noticed, the first decrees that would offer legal basis for the Emergency Remote Education, which will be discussed here, were in line with the regulation of Distance Education, providing for the use of DICT's. However, there were further changes, as the proposition that the teaching/learning process could be mediated by low technologies, such as radio and television, or even not be mediated by any technological means, such as printed materials. This can lead to a precarious remote education or even an inequality in the quality of offer, since some students can have full access to synchronic classes with the teacher's/professor's support, while others would have only printed material to follow the content.

BAHIA STATE AND STATE UNIVERSITY CHALLENGING SOCIOECONOMIC CONTEXT

According to the last Brazilian census [2], in 2019, the state of Bahia has an HDI of 0,660, occupying the 22nd position (among the 27 states) on the national ranking. The nominal monthly household earnings per capita of the state is 913.00 Brazilian *Reais* (BRL) (235.30 USD) (All the USD conversion values made on this paper were made considering the exchange rate at the time of the related events.), the twentieth in the national ranking of states. The amount is lower than the Brazilian minimum wage, of 954.00 BRL (245.87 USD) at the time [8]. The State University under study here has 8,222 undergraduate enrolled students [9]. The Student Welfare Programs, as well as the Funding Programs of Scientific Initiation and Initiation to Teaching fulfill a relevant role, since they enable students to afford costs with housing, food and transportation, and especially for students coming from other municipalities, as well as from rural areas of the state, to live in the municipalities of the University's *campi*.

On the state level, in addition to the limitation of the Government funds, sourced directly from the federal budget, there is a wage freeze for public employees of the state of Bahia, as well as for the state budget for the Universities since 2014. Although there has been a gross increase in this budget, figures show a deficit of nearly 18% if compared with the inflation of the period, calculated from the Extended National Consumer Price Index (IPCA). In the case of the State University under study, only in 2019, this corresponds to the amount of 11 million BRL (2,73 million USD) [8]. Such freezing/withdraw of the budget abovementioned compromises also the student permanence in the University.

In an agreement between the Federal Government and the Government of the State of Bahia, a National Plan for Student Assistance for State Public Higher

Education Institutions (Pnaest) was established. Nevertheless, in 2019, the University under study had to relocate 1 million BRL (around 242,000 USD) to the Student Welfare Program, leaving still a deficit of 500,000 BRL (around 121,000 USD) for these expenses [8]. In 2020, due to the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the face-to-face classes of undergraduate courses of the University were suspended in March, as well as its academic calendar.

Although graduate teaching activities, as well as research and extension activities were continued by virtual platforms and apps, the Government of the State of Bahia stipulated that the release of the University's budget for cost and maintenance must be accompanied by the return of undergraduate courses' teaching/learning activities [9]. On July 9th, the return of the undergraduate courses' teaching/learning activities previously interrupted was approved by the University.

However, the Higher Council of Teaching, Research, and Extension Programs (Consepe) of the University established that this return must be accompanied by programs of digital inclusion of students and digital training of professors [10]. The financing for the actions of the student digital inclusion program is composed by 1,1 million BRL (around 206,000 USD) from the Student Welfare Assistance funds already received in the period prior to the suspension of the undergraduate classes, as well as by 300,000 BRL (around 56,000 USD) from office funds from federal deputies of Bahia. The total amount for this program is 1,4 million BRL (around 262,000 USD), though until early September, only 67% of the amount was available [9].

THE STATE UNIVERSITY'S DIGITAL INCLUSION PLAN AND THE STUDENT'S SOCIOECONOMIC REALITY

The draft of the student digital inclusion program, prepared by an Executive Committee of Consepe, plans to provide 1,600 scholarships in the amount of 800 BRL (around 150 USD) for equipment acquisition, as well as 1,000 scholarships in the amount of 50 BRL (around 10 USD) per month for internet service acquisition. Students living in localities without an internet services may apply for either of the following two transportation assistance programs: there are 65 scholarships in the amount of 60 BRL (around 12 USD) per month for residences 60 km or more away from a municipality with internet services, and there are also 65 scholarships in the amount 40 BRL (around 8 USD) per month for distances of less than 60 km. Both scholarships will have four months of duration. [9], [11]

However, a survey [12] conducted by the Pro-Rectorcy of Undergraduate Studies (PROGRAD) shows that 32% of the students do not have adequate equipment for the Emergency Remote Education. We consider that notebook or netbook are the suitable equipment for Remote Education classes, since tablets or smartphones do not encompass the academic demand for reading and writing long texts. In turn, 30.6% of the students do not have internet in their residence. This

questionnaire had 3,091 respondents. Applying these percentages to the total of 8,222 students enrolled in the undergraduate courses at the University, we would have a total of 2,630 students without adequate equipment and another 2,515 without internet in their homes. Different undergraduate courses made their own surveys, since the sample of students who answered the PROGRAD questionnaire was small and that some other questions could be better investigated.

We present here, specifically, the survey on internet and equipment conditions, carried out among students of two undergraduate courses of Humanities. In the first course, a Teaching degree, when describing the internet available in their locality, where they will be during the pandemic, 93 (51.4%) students rated the internet in the locality as good or very good; 34 (18,8%) as regular; 29 (16%) as bad; and 17 (9.4%) students rated the internet available as insufficient or non-existent. Another 8 (4.4%) students did not answer this question. Regarding equipment, only 95 (52.5%) students reported having complete equipment (i.e., that processes text and video, besides having webcam, microphone and external keyboard, if necessary). Another 77 (42.5%) students reported having incomplete equipment and another 9 (5.0%) did not describe their equipment.

In the second undergraduate course, a Bachelor's degree, there are 23 (14.7%) students without internet access through appropriate equipment (notebook, netbook and/or computer). However, among these students, 14 (9.0%) of them rated the internet available in their community as insufficient or non-existent. As for equipment, only 80 (51.3%) students would have a suitable equipment for the Emergency Remote Education. Of the rest, 47 (30.1%) students reporting having equipment that does not process text and/or video, or would not have a webcam and/or microphone; 17 (10.9%) students report not having notebook, netbook, or desktop; and 12 (7.7%) students report having suitable equipment, but that would not be available during the class hours (considering the original face-to-face classes), once these equipment are shared with other residents.

Regarding changes in work routine due to the pandemic scenario, among the students of the first undergraduate course, the majority, 123 (68.0%) students report not having undergone changes over the pandemic period. On the other hand, 25 (13.8%) students started working and caring for people at home simultaneously, 7 (3.9%) students started working on the course shift, and 11 (6.1%) students report losing their jobs during the pandemic. Another 15 (8.3%) did not answer that question. Similarly, among the students of the second undergraduate course, although most students stated that there were no changes in their work routine (91 students, or 58.3%), 31 (19.9%) students point out that they started working and caring for people at home simultaneously, and another 15 (9.6%) students are working full-time or during the class hours (considering the original face-to-face classes). Another 19 (12.2%) students did not answer the question.

CONCLUSION

In sum, from the data presented, it is possible to point out some issues regarding resuming the regular semester of face-to-face undergraduate courses via Emergency Remote Education at the University under study. At first, we can point out that the amount of scholarships for students to acquire internet services and equipment is shown to be massively insufficient. The first survey, made by PROGRAD, and, even more markedly, subsequent surveys, such as those made by the two undergraduate courses abovementioned, point to a large number of students who would not be reached out by these digital inclusion programs.

Moreover, the fact that students have scholarships for the acquisition of equipment and internet services does not mean that they are able to follow remote classes. Purchasing a low-cost notebook requires an expense of nearly 1500 BRL (around 280 USD). As for the internet, broadband internet contracts usually present installation fees of around 200 BRL (around 38 USD), and a minimum duration of 1 year (and also financial penalties in case of breaking the contract). In mobile data contracts of lower cost, the data offered is limited, of around 10GB, and may not be sufficient to follow an entire month of classes.

In order to overcome the limitations or even the impossibility of internet access at the students' place of residence during the pandemic, the proposal for transport assistance was elaborated. Obviously, such proposal presents a series of issues, since it contradicts the WHO's recommendations and exposes students to risks of contamination in public transport. In addition, students would not have access to internet centers (or hotspots), due to the current pandemic context and the lack of adequate infrastructure provided by the University.

On top of this, regardless of the financial investment made by University, there will be a non-negligible number of students who will not be able to fully engage in the academic activities of Emergency Remote Education, either because they live in places where there is not enough internet available, or because they have their routine modified, mostly by starting working and/or taking care of other people at home.

Despite the merits of enabling the continuity of the undergraduate courses' academic activities of Higher Education Institutions, it is possible to observe, in the efforts of different Brazilian government bodies, including the University discussed in this paper, a dilemma: either the quality of the education can be compromised, since, with the flexibilization of the guidelines for Emergency Remote Education, almost anything goes in how a class must be carried out, for instance; or a large number of students can be excluded from the academic process, reinforcing the socioeconomic inequalities among students, now more explicitly reproduced in the academic sphere.

It is worth mentioning that both ends of the dilemma are not mutually exclusive, especially when Emergency Remote Education proposes to replace the classes of regular face-to-face undergraduate courses, as is the case of the University discussed in this paper.

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