

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF DISTANCE EDUCATION IN PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

The institutionalization of Distance Education (DE) in Public Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) is a complex, multifactorial process that involves organizational, pedagogical, and regulatory dimensions. This study presents a systematic literature review on the institutionalization of DE in Brazilian public institutions from 2010 to 2025, conducted in accordance with the PRISMA 2020 protocol. The search was carried out in the CAPES Periodicals Portal and the CAPES Theses and Dissertations Catalog, applying previously defined inclusion and exclusion criteria. After the stages of identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion, ten studies (seven articles and three theses) were selected and composed the analytical corpus. The data were examined through thematic content analysis, which allowed the results to be organized into three categories: institutionalization processes, institutional management, and public policies. The findings indicate that effective institutionalization involves the phases of habitualization, objectification, and sedimentation, although most institutions remain at initial or intermediate stages. Recurring challenges include funding dependency, the integration of DE into institutional plans, and the need for specific regulation. It is concluded that the modality's sustainability depends on alignment with organizational culture and ongoing regulatory support, and that the scarcity of empirical studies on the subject is highlighted.

Keywords: Distance education. Institutionalization of distance education. Public higher education institutions.

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INSTITUCIONALIZAÇÃO DA EDUCAÇÃO A DISTÂNCIA NAS INSTITUIÇÕES PÚBLICAS DE ENSINO SUPERIOR: UMA REVISÃO SISTEMÁTICA DE LITERATURA

RESUMO

A institucionalização da Educação a Distância (EaD) nas Instituições Públicas de Ensino Superior (IPES) constitui processo complexo e multifatorial, envolvendo dimensões organizacionais, pedagógicas e regulatórias. Este estudo apresenta uma revisão sistemática da literatura sobre a institucionalização da EaD em instituições públicas brasileiras no período de 2010 a 2025, conduzida conforme o protocolo PRISMA 2020. A busca foi realizada no Portal de Periódicos CAPES e no Catálogo de Teses e Dissertações da CAPES, aplicando descritores, critérios de inclusão e exclusão previamente definidos. Após as etapas de identificação, triagem, elegibilidade e inclusão, foram selecionados dez estudos (sete artigos e três teses), que compuseram o corpus analítico. Os dados foram examinados por meio da análise temática de conteúdo, permitindo a organização dos resultados em três categorias: processos de institucionalização, gestão institucional e políticas públicas. Os achados indicam que a institucionalização efetiva envolve as fases de habitualização, objetivação e sedimentação, embora a maioria das instituições permaneça em estágios iniciais ou intermediários. Destacam-se como desafios recorrentes a dependência de financiamento, a integração da EaD aos planos institucionais e a necessidade de regulamentação específica. Conclui-se que a sustentabilidade da modalidade depende do alinhamento com a cultura organizacional e de suporte regulatório permanente, evidenciando também a escassez de estudos empíricos sobre o tema.

Palavras-chave: Educação a distância. Institucionalização da EaD. Instituições Públicas de Ensino Superior.

INSTITUCIONALIZACIÓN DE LA EDUCACIÓN A DISTANCIA EN INSTITUCIONES PÚBLICAS DE EDUCACIÓN SUPERIOR: UNA REVISIÓN SISTEMÁTICA DE LA LITERATURA

RESUMEN

La institucionalización de la Educación a Distancia (EaD) en las Instituciones Públicas de Educación Superior (IPES) constituye un proceso complejo y multifactorial que involucra dimensiones organizacionales, pedagógicas y regulatorias. Este estudio presenta una revisión sistemática de la literatura sobre la institucionalización de la EaD en instituciones públicas brasileñas en el período de 2010 a 2025, realizada conforme al protocolo PRISMA 2020.

La búsqueda se llevó a cabo en el Portal de Periódicos CAPES y en el Catálogo de Tesis y Disertaciones de CAPES, aplicando descriptores y criterios de inclusión y exclusión previamente definidos. Tras las etapas de identificación, cribado, elegibilidad e inclusión, se seleccionaron diez estudios (siete artículos y tres tesis), que conformaron el corpus analítico. Los datos fueron examinados mediante análisis temático de contenido, lo que permitió organizar los resultados en tres categorías: procesos de institucionalización, gestión institucional y políticas públicas. Los hallazgos indican que la institucionalización efectiva implica las fases de habitualización, objetivación y sedimentación, aunque la mayoría de las instituciones permanece en etapas iniciales o intermedias. Entre los desafíos recurrentes destacan la dependencia de financiamiento, la integración de la EaD en los planes institucionales y la necesidad de una regulación específica. Se concluye que la sostenibilidad de la modalidad depende de su alineación con la cultura organizacional y de un soporte regulatorio permanente, evidenciándose también la escasez de estudios empíricos sobre el tema.

Palabras clave: Educación a distancia. Institucionalización de la EaD. Instituciones públicas de educación superior.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Distance Education (DE) has become increasingly established as a significant educational approach within the Brazilian educational landscape, particularly in the context of higher education, driven by the growing integration of Digital Information and Communication Technologies (DICTs) into educational practices. In this context, DE has gained prominence as a teaching modality that expands access to higher education by overcoming geographical barriers and providing flexibility for diverse student populations.

In this regard, understanding how the process of institutionalizing DE has been taking place within public higher education institutions (PHEIs) is of great importance for identifying best practices, policies, and administrative and pedagogical innovations, as well as for developing strategies that may support the implementation of this modality in an integrated manner alongside face-to-face education. Such efforts should be grounded in guidelines that ensure its quality and sustainability.

In light of the foregoing, the objective of this study is to present a systematic literature review addressing the landscape of Distance Education (DE) institutionalization processes in public higher education institutions (PHEIs), as described in empirical research published in the form of scientific articles between 2010 and 2025. Additionally, the study seeks to examine the factors influencing the institutionalization process, including public policies, challenges, and organizational, institutional, and pedagogical impacts.

To this end, the article is organized into five sections. The first section presents the introduction, including a brief contextualization of the topic and the study objectives. The second section discusses the main concepts related to distance education and institutionalization. The third section describes the methodological procedures adopted in the study. The fourth section presents the analysis and discussion of the results, and the fifth section offers the final considerations.

2. DISTANCE EDUCATION AND ITS INSTITUTIONALIZATION PROCESS IN PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

In Brazil, public higher education institutions have traditionally been organized around face-to-face instruction, and a lengthy process of institutionalization has been required for Distance Education (DE) to become integrated into this context. According to Meyer (2022), DE is a form of education in which instructors and students are, to some extent, separated by space and time, and it evolves alongside scientific and technological advancements while expanding opportunities for access to education.

In this regard, it is important to recognize that the institutionalization of DE is not limited to the provision of courses; rather, it requires academic, pedagogical, administrative, technological, and cultural transformations. In this context, Pareschi and Mill (2022, p. 3) emphasize that “[...] the process of institutionalizing DE must occur organically, based on a clear understanding that it is an educational modality with a distinct methodological approach.” Such a transition demands multifaceted adaptations, representing both a challenge and an opportunity for public universities.

In this sense, according to Veloso and Mill (2022, p. 4), “institutionalizing DE represents the incorporation of this educational modality into the university’s routines, regulations, and organizational practices, ceasing to operate as an exceptional initiative.” Therefore, institutionalization constitutes a dynamic and complex process that involves not only bureaucratic aspects but also personal, cultural, and ideological relationships.

On the other hand, the regulation of DE in public higher education institutions (PHEIs) follows two main approaches: a national public policy framework implemented through the Open University of Brazil (UAB), which is characterized by a standardized and consolidated model, and the institutions’ own pedagogical paradigms. According to Ferreira and Carneiro (2015), these approaches encompass both a systemic dimension and an academic-pedagogical and administrative dimension, which must be aligned with the structure of face-to-face education.

From this perspective, Vieira et al. (2012) emphasize that the greatest challenge lies in integrating DE into existing institutional structures rather than merely creating new bureaucratic units, since integration involves multiple stages and encounters internal resistance. Thus, incorporating DE entails modifying multiple institutional dimensions and requires regulatory frameworks capable of ensuring its effective development.

Accordingly, overcoming organizational challenges is also directly linked to the financial sustainability of the modality. The full institutionalization of Distance Education (DE) in public higher education institutions (PHEIs) tends to occur when its funding ceases to depend on specific and temporary programs—such as the Open University of Brazil (UAB)—and becomes incorporated into the institution’s regular budgetary framework.

Thus, rather than constituting merely an operational issue, institutional funding emerges as a structural element of the institutionalization process, as it directly influences staff stability, the continuity of educational offerings, and the integration of the modality into academic planning.

In Brazil, public higher education institutions have traditionally been structured around face-to-face education, and a long and complex trajectory has been undertaken through the process of institutionalization for DE to become integrated into this context.

3. METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES

This study is characterized as a qualitative Systematic Literature Review (SLR), defined by Galvão and Ricarte (2019) as a type of research that follows established protocols to analyze and organize a large body of documents, identifying what is effective or ineffective within a given context. The SLR was conducted in accordance with the PRISMA 2020 statement, as outlined by Page et al. (2022).

Scientific articles and doctoral dissertations were carefully selected and analyzed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the topics under investigation. Searches were conducted in the CAPES Journal Portal (for articles) and the CAPES Theses and Dissertations Catalog (for dissertations), encompassing studies published between 2010 and 2025. Three groups of search descriptors were organized: Group 1 – “Distance Education” AND “Institutionalization of Distance Education” AND “Higher Education”; Group 2 – “Institutionalization of Distance Education”; Group 3 – “Institutionalization” AND “Distance Education” AND “DE.” Data collection was carried out between January and February 2025, and the stages of the review process are presented in Table 1.

For the selection of articles, the descriptors from Group 1—“Distance Education” AND “Institutionalization of Distance Education” AND “Higher Education”—were used, yielding 39 results. For Group 2—“Institutionalization of Distance Education”—75 results were identified, while Group 3—“Institutionalization” AND “Distance Education” AND “DE”—returned 52 results, resulting in a total of 166 preselected articles.

For the selection process in the CAPES Theses and Dissertations Catalog, the descriptors “Institutionalization of DE” and “Institutionalization of Distance Education” were used. The search returned 45 results for the former descriptor and 83 for the latter, totaling 128 studies.

Subsequently, the titles, abstracts, keywords, and introductions of the identified studies were reviewed, and the previously established inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied in order to select only those works that demonstrated direct relevance to the object of study (Table 1).

Table 1 – Stages of the Systematic Literature Review

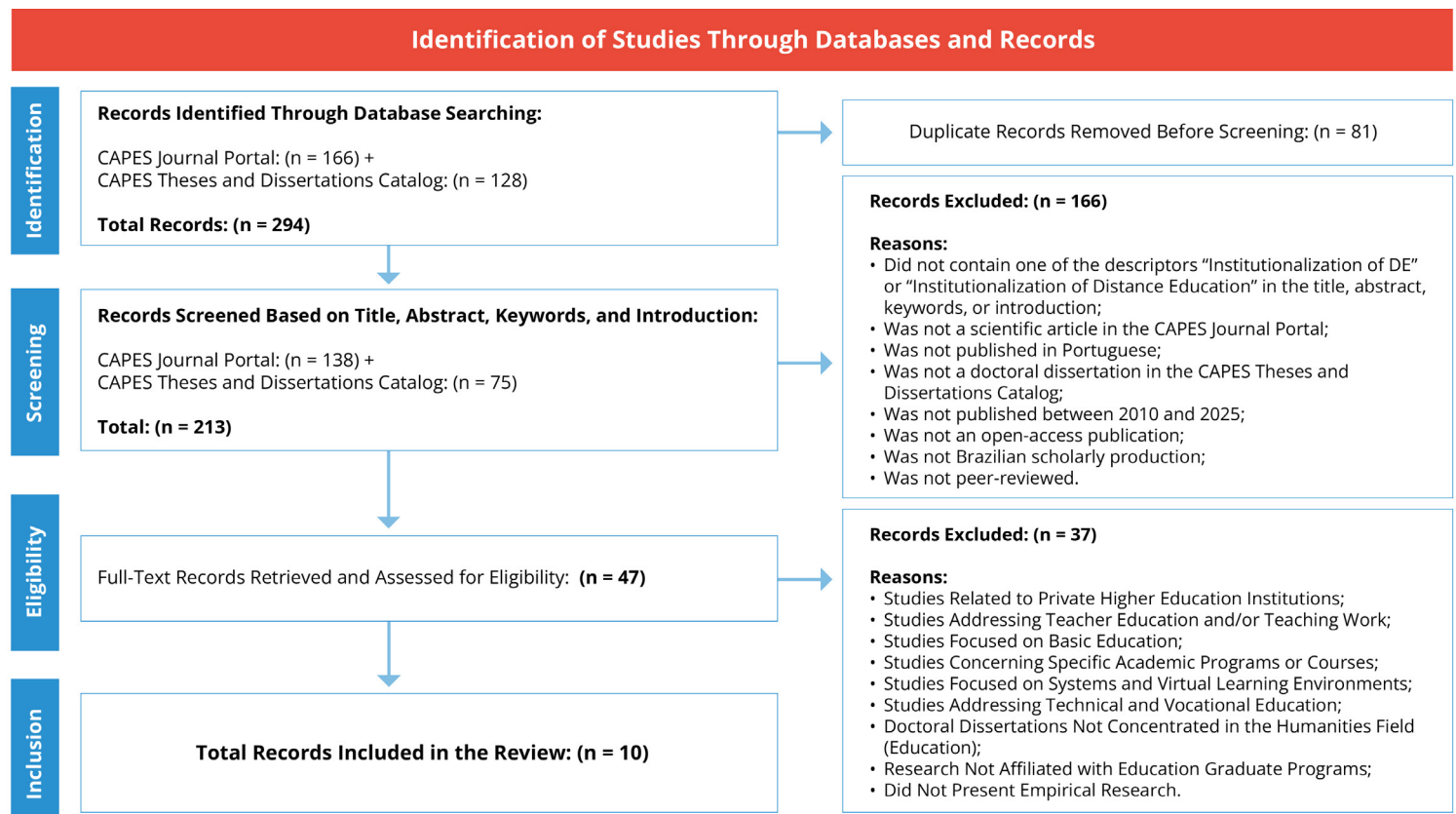
Data Sources	CAPES Journal Portal / CAPES Theses and Dissertations Catalog.
Search Descriptors	"Distance Education" AND "Institutionalization of Distance Education" AND "Higher Education," "Institutionalization of Distance Education," and "Institutionalization" AND "Distance Education" AND "DE" (in the CAPES Journal Portal); and "Institutionalization of DE" and "Institutionalization of Distance Education" (in the CAPES Theses and Dissertations Catalog).
Search Fields	Title, abstract, keywords, and introduction.
Publication Period	2010–2025.
Types of Publications	Scientific articles (CAPES Journal Portal) and doctoral dissertations (CAPES Theses and Dissertations Catalog).
Inclusion Criteria	• Must contain at least one of the descriptors "Institutionalization," "DE," "Distance Education," or "Higher Education" in the title, abstract, keywords, or introduction; • Scientific articles; • Doctoral dissertations within the broad field of Humanities, in the field of Education, and affiliated with an Education area of concentration and graduate program; • Portuguese-language publications; • Published between 2010 and 2025; • Open-access publications; • National (Brazilian) scholarly production; • Peer-reviewed publications.
Exclusion Criteria	• Studies related to private higher education institutions; • Studies addressing teacher education and/or teaching work; • Studies focused on basic education; • Studies concerning specific academic programs or courses; • Studies focused on systems and virtual learning environments; • Studies addressing technical and vocational education; • Studies that do not present empirical research.

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Source: Prepared by the authors (2025).

After applying the established eligibility criteria, this stage was completed with a total of 47 studies, to which the exclusion criteria highlighted in the flowchart presented in Figure 1 were applied.

Figure 1 – Flowchart of the Study Selection Process



Source: Prepared by the authors (2025).

After applying the screening, eligibility, inclusion, and exclusion criteria described in Figure 1, a total of 10 studies remained (seven articles and three doctoral dissertations), which constitute the final corpus of analysis. The selected studies were analyzed using thematic content analysis, as proposed by Gomes (2010), a procedure that enabled the identification of interpretive patterns and the organization of the findings into analytical categories.

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF THE DATA GENERATED

To better present the data and discussion, Table 2 was developed to provide a synthesis of each selected study identified in the CAPES Journal Portal and the CAPES Theses and Dissertations Catalog, highlighting the title, authors, year of publication, and methodology employed in the respective studies.

Table 2 – Studies Selected for the Systematic Literature Review (SLR)

TITLE	AUTHORS / YEAR	DATABASE	METHODOLOGY
The Challenges of Institutionalizing Distance Higher Education: The Perspective of Administrators at a Federal University	Nascimento and Vieira (2016)	CAPES Journal Portal	Qualitative analysis through participatory research and content analysis (document analysis, discourse analysis, and statistical analysis of documents).
Institutionalization of Distance Education at the University of Brasília (2005–2015)	Melo (2016)	Catálogo de Teses e Dissertações CAPES	Case study grounded in Institutional Theory, employing document analysis and interviews.
The Evolution of Distance Higher Education in Brazil: An Analysis Based on Institutionalization Processes	Da Silva Correia Neto and Valadão (2017)	CAPES Journal Portal	Document and content analysis. The document analysis focused on the systematization of documents, while the content analysis sought to identify patterns, meanings, and themes.
Distance Education Public Policy: A Study of the Implementation Phase of Two Programs at the Federal University of Lavras	Borba <i>et al.</i> (2018).	CAPES Journal Portal	Qualitative research based on an interpretive paradigm. The study included document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and a case study approach.
The Trajectory and Institutionalization Process of Distance Education at the Federal University of Mato Grosso	Petter (2019).	Catálogo de Teses e Dissertações CAPES	Case study involving document analysis, archival records, and semi-structured interviews.
The Institutionalization Process of Distance Education at the Federal University of São Carlos (UFSCar) from 2004 to 2018	Chaquime (2019).	Catálogo de Teses e Dissertações CAPES	Bibliographic and documentary research, combined with fieldwork involving interviews. Data were analyzed using content and document analysis.
Renewed Educational Reproduction: Intra-Institutional Duality in the Open University of Brazil Program	Pimenta, Rosso and Sousa (2019).	CAPES Journal Portal	Qualitative study. The authors employed the analysis of semi-structured interviews, active listening, and systematic observation.
The Institutionalization of Distance Education in Federal Public Universities: The Case of the Federal University of Santa Catarina	Matos, Beck and Souza (2020).	CAPES Journal Portal	Case study using content analysis as the primary method for data analysis.
The Institutionalization of Public Distance Education as an Essentially Dialectical Phenomenon	Veloso and Mill (2022).	CAPES Journal Portal	Study employing document analysis, virtual focus groups, semi-structured interviews, the Delphi Technique, and an online questionnaire.
The Institutionalization Process of Public Distance Education: An Analysis of Institutionalization Processes in Brazil and Portugal	Veloso, Moreira and Mill (2024).	CAPES Journal Portal	Document analysis and semi-structured interviews.

Source: Prepared by the authors (2025).

Ten studies were selected to compose this systematic literature review, namely those conducted by Nascimento and Vieira (2016); Melo (2016); Da Silva Correia Neto and Valadão (2017); Borba et al. (2018); Petter (2019); Chaquime (2019); Pimenta, Rosso, and Sousa (2019); Matos, Beck, and Souza (2020); Veloso and Mill (2022); and Veloso, Moreira, and Mill (2024). Based on the full reading and analysis of these ten studies, it was possible to identify three emergent categories derived from the thematic content analysis proposed by Gomes (2010).

4.1 – Categorization

Table 3 was developed to explicitly present the analytical categories identified to guide the Systematic Literature Review (SLR). Subsequently, the selected studies were systematically distributed among these categories according to their thematic and conceptual alignment, ensuring internal coherence in the analysis and consistency in the organization of the corpus.

Table 3 – Thematic Occurrence of Studies Across Analytical Categories

ANALYTICAL CATEGORIES		
Institutionalization Process	Institutional Management	Public Policies for Distance Education
• Nascimento and Vieira (2016); • Melo (2016); • Da Silva Correia Neto and Valadão (2017); • Petter (2019); • Chaquime (2019); • Matos, Beck and Souza (2020); • Veloso and Mill (2022); • Veloso Moreira and Mill (2024).	• Nascimento and Vieira (2016); • Melo (2016); • Pimenta, Rosso and Sousa (2019); • Petter (2019); • Chaquime (2019); • Matos, Beck and Souza (2020); • Veloso and Mill (2022); • Veloso Moreira and Mill (2024).	• Borba <i>et al.</i> (2018); • Pimenta, Rosso and Sousa (2019); • Petter (2019); • Matos, Beck and Souza (2020); • Veloso and Mill (2022); • Veloso Moreira and Mill (2024).

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Source: Prepared by the authors (2025).

It should be noted that a single study may present contributions to more than one analytical category, which is why some studies appear in different columns. This finding indicates a certain balance among the investigative perspectives surrounding the topic under examination (the institutionalization of distance education in public higher education institutions), despite the complexity and specificities of the contexts involved.

4.1.1 - Analytical Category 1: Institutionalization Process

In the study conducted by Nascimento and Vieira (2016) at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte (UFRN), a comparative overview is presented of the actions undertaken by higher education institutions that have advanced in the institutionalization of Distance Education (DE). The study highlights: (a) the incorporation of the modality into the Institutional Development Plan (IDP) and the Institutional Pedagogical Project, as well as the establishment of specific regulations for DE; (b) the creation of a dedicated administrative unit, faculty and technical staff training initiatives,

and the offering of extension courses and academic subjects; and (c) the promotion of research and tutoring activities, in addition to the use of a platform integrated with the academic management system. The offering of distance-learning courses within face-to-face degree programs has also fostered integration. However, the authors identify resistance regarding the quality of DE, often associated with apprehension toward innovation and prejudices that perceive it as an easier path to obtaining a degree.

Upon examining the study by Da Silva Correia Neto and Valadão (2017), we observe an analysis of the evolution of Distance Education (DE) in Brazil through the lens of Institutional Theory, adopting the model proposed by Tolbert and Zucker (1998), which comprises three stages: (a) habituation, characterized by structural adjustments and standardization; (b) objectification, marked by social consensus and public visibility; and (c) sedimentation, which depends on structural continuity and low levels of resistance. The authors indicate that DE has already progressed through the stages of habituation and objectification; however, sedimentation remains uncertain, reinforcing the dynamic and ongoing nature of the institutionalization process.

Melo (2016), in turn, investigates DE at the University of Brasília (UnB), also drawing on Institutional Theory. The study demonstrates that the modality has advanced beyond the pre-institutionalization and habituation stages, driven by the coercive isomorphism associated with the Open University of Brazil (UAB) Program. Currently, DE is characterized as being in a stage of semi-institutionalization, with objectified practices but without full sedimentation. The author concludes that institutionalization requires more than formal documents; it demands both symbolic and practical appropriation by the university, a process that has not yet been fully consolidated.

In her dissertation, Petter (2019) analyzes the integration and consolidation of DE at the Federal University of Mato Grosso (UFMT) as a continuous and dynamic process. The study identifies three phases (1992–2005, 2006–2011, and 2012–2017), each marked by both advances and obstacles. Although UFMT was a pioneer in offering the first distance teacher education program officially recognized by the Ministry of Education (MEC), the institution faced challenges related to limited internal dissemination, regulatory fragility, and the absence of a clear institutional identity for DE. The author concludes that institutionalization requires more than the provision of courses or the establishment of administrative structures; it depends on the integration of DE into the organizational culture, institutional recognition, and coordinated, strategic action.

Chaquime (2019) examines the institutionalization of Distance Education (DE) at the Federal University of São Carlos (UFSCar) through the lens of Institutional Theory, portraying it as a dynamic process resulting from the interaction between the university and the broader educational field. The institution's adherence to the Open University of Brazil (UAB) System served as the catalyst for the creation of the Distance Education Superintendence (SEaD) and the initiation of the habituation stage, followed by objectification and sedimentation. The study reveals that institutionalization at UFSCar is associated both with the pursuit of legitimacy and compliance with social norms and with tensions between the university's public mission and market-driven pressures.

According to Matos, Beck, and Souza (2020), the institutionalization process at the Federal University of Santa Catarina (UFSC) faces several challenges, including the absence of formal integration, inadequate administrative infrastructure, a shortage of permanent staff, budgetary constraints, and the exclusion of DE from the institution's regular funding framework. The authors advocate measures such as integrating the DE academic calendar with that of face-to-face programs, treating distance education programs as regular academic offerings, incorporating the modality into the institution's general budget, and establishing specific regulatory frameworks.

Veloso and Mill (2022) conceptualize institutionalization as a continuous, multifaceted, and non-binary process aimed at consolidating practices in order to ensure legitimacy, while simultaneously involving resistance and institutional disputes. For these authors, the organic incorporation of DE requires overcoming dichotomous perspectives as well as internal and external forms of resistance.

Veloso, Moreira, and Mill (2024) compare the institutionalization of Distance Education (DE) in Brazil and Portugal. In Brazil, the process is endogenous, driven by public policies and the Open University of Brazil (UAB) System within traditionally face-to-face universities, generating both tensions and advances. In Portugal, the process is exogenous, centered on the Open University, an institution created exclusively for DE, whose recognition involved legal and institutional disputes. In both countries, DE plays a central role in teacher education and points toward the growing trend of educational hybridization.

Thus, the institutionalization of DE in Brazilian public universities is a complex process that extends beyond bureaucracy and the mere provision of online courses, requiring broad transformations across academic, pedagogical, administrative, and technological dimensions, with a direct impact on the organizational culture of public higher education institutions (PHEIs). When successfully implemented, institutionalization strengthens the integration of the modality, ensuring quality, legitimacy, and institutional sustainability. To achieve this, it requires regulations, procedures, and policies that expand access to higher education while guaranteeing educational quality. Although well-planned strategies can accelerate the process, its success also depends on institutional and subjective factors.

4.1.2 - Analytical Category 2: Institutional Management

The studies addressing the institutional management of Distance Education (DE) in Public Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) reveal both significant progress and numerous challenges. Nascimento and Vieira (2016), in a study conducted with academic administrators at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte (UFRN), identified high dropout rates, difficulties in organizational adaptation, and faculty resistance to adopting DE practices as the main obstacles to consolidating the modality. Although the institutionalization process remains at an early stage, the authors advocate measures such as the establishment of permanent channels for dialogue, technological training initiatives, the provision of adequate funding, and the integration of DE into institutional development plans.

The study conducted by Melo (2016) at the University of Brasília (UnB) points to similar barriers, including the absence of effective communication policies, a lack of collaborative learning among administrators, and uncertainty regarding the continuity of the modality. Despite technological and structural advances, the institutional recognition of DE remains limited, hindered by insufficient coordination among the university's various administrative and academic sectors.

Chaquime (2019), in analyzing the experience of the Federal University of São Carlos (UFSCar), highlights that the creation of the Distance Education Secretariat (SEaD) represented a significant organizational advancement, but also generated internal tensions. Despite progress in collaborative teaching models, instructional materials, and the use of digital technologies, the modality remained dependent on external funding sources, particularly those provided by CAPES, which compromises its autonomy and hinders its full integration into institutional policies.

A similar situation was identified at the Federal University of Mato Grosso (UFMT), where Petter (2019) observes that, although specific administrative units were established, the management of DE was characterized by instability, fragmentation, and discontinuity. The author emphasizes that the absence of an articulated, long-term institutional project undermined both the legitimacy and the recognition of the modality.

At the University of Brasília, Pimenta, Rosso, and Sousa (2019) analyzed the implementation of the Open University of Brazil (UAB) System, demonstrating that although the modality had been incorporated into the Institutional Development Plan (IDP) and decentralized management had fostered progress, inequalities and the marginalization of DE in relation to face-to-face education persist. Furthermore, the precarious working conditions of tutors and infrastructure limitations reinforce the fragility of the institutionalization process.

The study conducted by Matos, Beck, and Souza (2020) at the Federal University of Santa Catarina (UFSC) reinforces these challenges by highlighting budgetary insufficiencies, the instability of personnel hired through CAPES-funded scholarships, and disagreements among administrators. The authors emphasize that the absence of a consolidated institutionalization process creates difficulties in standardization and continuity, underscoring the urgency of integrating DE in a systemic manner.

Veloso and Mill (2022) point out that cultural resistance and prejudice continue to constitute significant barriers. According to the authors, the establishment of dedicated management units has been fundamental; however, ongoing struggles for representation in institutional councils and for inclusion in regular budget allocations reveal the persistence of institutional tensions.

From a comparative perspective, Veloso, Moreira, and Mill (2024) analyze the cases of Portugal and Brazil. At the Open University of Portugal, an institution specialized in Distance Education, institutionalization resulted from exogenous pressures characterized by organizational and legal disputes. In Brazil, by contrast, the incorporation of the modality was driven endogenously through public policies, particularly the Open University of Brazil (UAB) System. The authors emphasize that, in both contexts, institutionalization faces internal disputes, while the hybridization of face-to-face and distance education emerges as an irreversible trend.

Given this scenario, institutional management emerges as a strategic and decisive factor in the consolidation of Distance Education (DE). Beyond the administration of academic programs, it involves the development of policies, regulations, and strategies capable of ensuring the legitimacy, quality, and integration of the modality into the universities' academic mission. The alignment of pedagogical, technological, and organizational dimensions is an essential condition for DE to be understood as an organic component of the institutional mission of Public Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs), thereby ensuring its sustainability and institutional recognition.

4.1.3 - Analytical Category 3: Public Policies for Distance Education

The debate surrounding the legislative and public policy aspects of Distance Education (DE) in Brazil reveals its central role in the institutionalization process of the modality. Matos, Beck, and Souza (2020) highlight important regulatory milestones, such as Decree No. 5,800/2006 (Brazil, 2006), which consolidated DE as a public policy and established the objectives of the Open University of Brazil (UAB) System, prioritizing teacher education, the expansion of access to higher education, and the reduction of regional inequalities.

Another milestone cited by the authors is Decree No. 9,057/2017 (Brazil, 2017), which expanded institutional autonomy in the creation of support centers and allowed institutions to obtain accreditation specifically for offering distance education programs without requiring prior accreditation for face-to-face instruction. Despite these advances, the authors emphasize persistent challenges, such as the precarious employment conditions of professionals, since positions remain linked to the UAB System rather than to the universities' regular administrative structures. They also highlight the exclusion of DE students from institutional budget allocation formulas, which creates distortions in funding mechanisms.

Data from the EaD.BR Census (2017, as cited in Matos, Beck, & Souza, 2020) reveal additional concerns, including student attrition, whose causes remain insufficiently understood, and lower academic performance compared with face-to-face education. These factors directly affect the degree of DE institutionalization. In a similar vein, Pimenta, Rosso, and Sousa (2019) analyze the UAB System as an essential public policy for democratizing access to higher education by coordinating different levels of government in partnership with public universities. However, they identify critical obstacles, including precarious working conditions for tutors and technical staff hired through scholarship arrangements, as well as the persistence of inequalities that limit the effective educational equity envisioned by the initiative.

In this regard, Borba et al. (2018), in a study on the implementation of Distance Education (DE) at the Federal University of Lavras (UFLA), highlight the central role of the Distance Education Center (CEAD/UFLA) in coordinating activities, serving as a link between CAPES/UAB and local DE support centers. According to the authors, the management structure is characterized by centralized decision-making at CAPES, combined with operational flexibility at the local centers, which has enabled advances in institutional integration and management standardization, thereby strengthening the quality of academic programs.

Petter (2019), in her analysis of the experience of the Federal University of Mato Grosso (UFMT), situates DE within the broader framework of national public policies, emphasizing the National Education Guidelines and Framework Law (LDBEN/96), regulatory decrees, and the creation of the UAB System. Although acknowledging the progress achieved, the author criticizes the centralized and technocratic nature of the Ministry of Education's guidelines, arguing that they subordinate universities to a resource-acquisition logic, thereby limiting institutional autonomy. In her view, DE risks being instrumentalized as a compensatory policy aimed primarily at cost rationalization, rather than serving a broader commitment to critical and civic education. Consequently, Petter (2019) advocates for the political repositioning of Public Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) and for the development of public policies that consolidate DE as a state policy aligned with the university's mission.

Veloso and Mill (2022) reinforce this critique by highlighting universities' dependence on funding from the UAB System, which supports 72% of initiatives lacking their own budgetary allocation. According to the authors, this dependence perpetuates precarious working conditions and maintains DE as a parallel activity within institutions, thereby fueling internal resistance. They argue that overcoming this model is an essential condition for the effective institutionalization of DE and for the development of a hybrid and inclusive educational system.

From a comparative perspective, Veloso, Moreira, and Mill (2024) emphasize that, in Brazil, Distance Education (DE) is driven by inductive public policies, particularly the Open University of Brazil (UAB) System, which is primarily focused on teacher education. In Portugal, institutionalization has followed a different path, grounded in detailed regulatory frameworks, such as the Basic Law of the Educational System of 1986 and the Legal Framework for Distance Higher Education enacted in 2019. Although both countries have made significant progress, the nature of public policy—inductive in Brazil and regulatory in Portugal—has produced distinct trajectories in the consolidation of the modality.

Overall, the analysis of the “public policies” category demonstrates that the institutionalization of DE in Brazilian Public Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) depends not only on internal regulations but also on robust, sustainable state policies aligned with institutional needs. Although the UAB System has played a strategic role in expanding access to higher education, structural limitations remain, including the absence of dedicated institutional funding, precarious working conditions, and tensions between university autonomy and government-driven policy initiatives. Therefore, consolidating DE as a state policy requires adequate funding mechanisms, inclusive policy guidelines, and the full integration of the modality into the mission of public universities, thereby ensuring its legitimacy, sustainability, and social commitment.

5. CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review analyzed how the institutionalization process of Distance Education (DE) occurs within Public Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs), highlighting its stages, challenges, dimensions of institutional management, and the influence of public policies.

It is noteworthy that most institutions, including those with more extensive experience in the modality, remain in the initial or intermediate stages of the institutionalization process. The findings also indicate that the implementation and incorporation of DE into the organizational culture and institutional structures of PHEIs contribute to the advancement of both academic programs and the institution as a whole.

Recurring challenges include infrastructural limitations, such as the precarious employment conditions of professionals involved in DE through scholarship arrangements under the UAB System, lacking employment stability; student attrition; insufficient academic, administrative, and pedagogical integration with face-to-face education; dependence on external funding; and limited institutional autonomy in various procedures. These factors weaken the institutionalization process and negatively affect institutional management.

Institutionalization is a complex process, closely related to the culture, values, and regulatory frameworks of institutions, requiring profound changes throughout the organizational structure and being strongly influenced by the subjectivity of the individuals involved. The positioning and commitment of the actors leading this process are fundamental to the development of a robust modality capable of achieving stability and coexisting harmoniously with face-to-face education, each with its own specificities but both possessing equal potential for growth.

Institutional management plays an essential role in the implementation and consolidation of Distance Education (DE), ensuring adequate administrative and pedagogical structures, a clear definition of roles and responsibilities, and the effective integration of educational technologies. The systemic alignment of institutional and organizational dimensions is indispensable to the success of the institutionalization process, promoting a high-quality educational experience for both students and faculty members.

The consolidation of DE requires regulations, procedures, and public policies that address the real needs of institutions while ensuring sustainability and quality. Policies that promote the training of faculty members and tutors, financial autonomy, the provision of technological infrastructure, and the regulation of distance education programs constitute fundamental strategies for educational inclusion and the strengthening of DE. Such measures contribute to expanding access to higher education and fostering equity within the Brazilian educational system.

Given the persistence of these longstanding challenges, overcoming them requires concrete measures, such as the permanent incorporation of DE into institutional budget allocation frameworks; the creation of permanent positions specifically linked to the modality; the inclusion of DE students in regular funding indicators; and the consolidation of internal regulations that ensure the modality's full integration into academic planning. Without permanent structural funding and formal institutional recognition, DE will continue to operate as a temporary, policy-induced program rather than as a constitutive dimension of the public university.

A scarcity of research on the institutionalization of Distance Education (DE) in Public Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) is evident, particularly studies based on empirical evidence. During the period analyzed (2010–2025), most investigations were concentrated between 2012 and 2022, highlighting the need for continued research to assess the impact and evolution of the modality, as well as to identify institutional challenges and best practices.

Future studies may expand this analysis through comparative investigations across institutions and empirical approaches that further explore the institutional factors that facilitate or constrain the consolidation of DE in public universities.

Therefore, understanding the processes of DE institutionalization is essential for guiding institutional and public policies capable of consolidating the modality as a structuring dimension of the contemporary public university, ensuring educational processes grounded in quality and social relevance.

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