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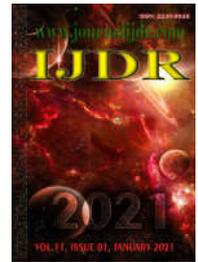
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## HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE OPEN UNIVERSITY OF BRAZIL IN AMAZON CONTEXTS: SOCIAL MOBILITY, DEVELOPMENT, THE ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES AND CAPABILITY APPROACH THEORIES

**\*Rosângela A. Alves Basso**

Modern Language Department- State University of Maringá (UEM), Maringá- Paraná- Brazil

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\*Corresponding author: *Rosângela A Alves Basso*

### ABSTRACT

This paper outlines some results from a PhD research concerning Higher Education, The Open University of Brazil and Distance Learning underlining issues about Social mobility development. The context is two Learning Centres delivering undergraduate courses from five public universities through The Open University of Brazil (UAB, abbreviation in Portuguese) consortium in Marajó Island, Pará, Brazil. By the end of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, public higher education and distance education reached the backlands in Brazil, where schooling may be considered a conquest for the local population and as the public policy of the State which upgrades numerically higher education in the country. Current problematization is therefore related to social, cultural, and economic significances from educational policy on local population. Discussions on the access to public Higher Education are foregrounded on the principles and terms of democracy, citizenship, and human development based on Amartya Sen's Capability Approach Theories. Results show that UAB Learning Centres, plays an important role in people's life opportunities, especially those marked by social conditions. Educational data in the context reveal an increase in teachers' qualifications, in Human Development Index and in the transformation of cultural capital into social and economic capital described by the interviewed people.

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## INTRODUCTION

We live in a world where the transformations occur much more dynamically and rapidly, impossible to guess a few decades ago. The 21<sup>st</sup> century has been marked by changes that go beyond the economic sphere for having established a democratic and participatory policy as a model of political organization. Thus, people and places around the world are globally connected discussing issues and concepts such as human rights, including education, health, and freedom. Such discussions revolve around ideas and ideals in pursuit of human and economic development. In this bias, education, seen as a public good and thus a right of all, is related to human and nations development. Therefore, relations and the role of education in this process, involving development, freedom, autonomy, and social mobility have been the subject of discussions in international bodies, such as the Organization of American States-OAS, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development -OECD, the United Nations-UN, as well as in some studies developed in countries, such as the United States, England, Brazil, among others, which have been considered as basis for public policies to expand education. According to the indicators released by the OECD, in the Reports Education at a Glance, in 2014 and 2019, has become evident that only economic growth is not enough to promote social progress, especially if the

dividends of this growth are not equally divided. The studies highlighted the crucial role of education in promoting this social progress. However, the reports stated, "there is, at first sight, an expansion of access to education in countries that comprise the OECD", but it is still necessary to invest in this expansion. As it was mentioned in Alves (2017), in this context, public policies and programs emerge as new possibilities in improving educational, political, and social outcomes. With this in mind, higher education has been part of the human, social and economic development indexes. So, democratization and expansion of access to this level of education is mandatory in the educational agenda internationally, reflecting the current scenario, as well as projecting future possibilities. Thus, the concept of social mobility is being an important indicator of freedom that leads the individual to achieve better social conditions and changes in their life. Similarly, educational systems, especially higher education, both in developed and developing countries, have undergone changes regarding the expansion of access in equal proportion, in different socio-economic groups, especially those that are socially discriminated. In this regard, Capabilities Approach Theories have been widely studied in the educational field and, in the last fifteen years, especially in studies involving issues of gender, equity, disability, and higher education (Walker, 2006, 2007, 2008; Unterhalter, 2005, 2007). In considering higher education, it is worth

noting that the authors have applied the concepts of Capability Approach to analyse relevant issues concerning the effects of the expansion of capabilities and their participation in this level of education. Saying that and considering the importance of education in the process of human and economic development, this paper deals especially with the expansion of the Public carried out by the Open University of Brazil- UAB in Amazonian contexts and its possible social transformation. For the purposes of analysis, it is important to resume and draw the panorama of the context studied. The state of Pará is the second largest in extension, with more than 1 million and 200,000 square kilometers, has 144 municipalities and an estimated population for 2015 of 8,175,113 inhabitants. The Human Development Index, in 2015 was 0.646, with a per capita income, in Brazilian Currency (Reais), of R\$672.00 and it had an incidence of poverty of 43.14%, while the Gini index of 0.44 (0.42-0.46). The Gini Coefficient<sup>1</sup> is a calculation used to measure social inequality and consists of a number between 0 and 1, where 0 corresponds to complete equality (in the case of income, for example, the whole population receives the same salary), and 1 corresponds to complete inequality (one person receives all income, and the other people receive nothing). The Gini index is the coefficient expressed in percentage points (it is equal to the coefficient multiplied by 100).

Some facts justified the study in Pará State including its geographical dimension, the issues of access to higher education, the significant number of active UAB learning centres, the job done on teacher training carried out by the National Teacher Training Program (Parfor), and the impact of this policy on basic education. On top of that, the distance education (DE) influences on students' life, which seems to be related to Higher Education access in remote areas. This study refers to two cities in Marajó Island. In physical terms, it is located at the mouth of the Amazon River; and it is the largest water-marine island in the world, with an area of more than 50,000 square kilometres with 16 municipalities. The data were collected in São Sebastião da Boa Vista and Breves, both connected with the capital Belém only by river network. It is 10 and 15 hours respectively, by boat with alternate trips, only 3 times a week. Another fact that must be addressed is that the state experiences a problem with the distribution of Higher Education Institutions (HEI). The Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) data (2014) indicated that about 70% of the state (Pará) population live in backlands, which shows a strong asymmetry in the vacancies supply in this level of education. Given this peculiarity, the demand in this area becomes much higher than in the capital. Not by chance, only 19 out of 35 private HEIs are in the backland cities, which reinforces the demand in these places. Unlike the private sector, the public sector, the number is much less, only 2 out of the 6 HEIs have their campuses in backlands. Therefore, the UAB learning Centres played a significant role in people's life. In qualitative terms, using Gadotti's ideas (2013), the quality of education must be considered in social terms. The ones that accentuate social, cultural, and environmental aspects of education. To this end, it is necessary to think about the social meanings for those who take the courses and for the communities in which the offers occur. Moreover, in this new approach, democracy is an essential component of quality in education: "quality for few people is not quality, it is privilege" (Gentili, 1995). Thus, thinking public, secular and quality higher education, its expansion, the expansion of opportunities for all, in these contexts, makes the distance learning modality the way to achieve people's educational and personal goals, especially the ones proposed by the Educational Guideline Plans.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research had an interdisciplinary character and articulated three theoretical approaches: studies on higher education and social mobility; on the knowledge society, Information and Communication

Technologies (ICTs); and on Capability Approach Theories. They are key concept in the discussions concerning contemporary society demand, as well as, on the role of higher education in the distance learning modality in Brazil.

In epistemological terms, it was considered studies conducted by Bourdieu (1983, 1986) and Sen (1979, 1992, 1993, 1999, 2002, 2009) and their influence on education. The notion of field and Capital from Bourdieu and the Theories of Capability Approach from Sen supported the discussions to fulfil the main objectives proposed. Those who study Sen's theories see it as an alternative to the economic models of quality-of-life assessment, that is, those models of analysis that are restricted to the concept of gross domestic product per capita. Focusing on human life, the Capability Approach "shifts attention to the real opportunities of life" (SEN, 2009, p. 275). The starting point is to seek to know what people really are able to be and do, because the development of a person is only possible if they have the freedom to choose how to live, or even conditions that allow them to fully develop their abilities to be and do the best they can to shape their own life, what they value. Regarding qualitative field work procedures, the data was collected through field research, semi-structured interviews, and online questionnaires. For the interviews, it was elaborated a script in which it sought to describe social phenomena, as well as their explanation and their recognition in its entirety. The objective of the interviews was to seek information about opinions, conceptions, expectations, perceptions about the experience in the UAB and in the distance learning modality. Giving the interviewee a chance, through his/her life history, talk about some social and cultural conditions and their changes during their academic trajectory. It was opted a semi-structured interview because it resembled a dialogue or a conversation with the interviewee, allowing greater flexibility and individualization of communication. Considering the use of the technologies and the fact that the participants were in remote locations, it was applied the questionnaire online elaborated through the Survey Monkey program, to 49 students, however, 43 answered. In order to obtain answers to the initial questions and achieve the objectives the questionnaire was semi-structured, and composed of 23 questions related to personal, social and academic scope, some objective questions and constructed answers (open questions) performed with students and graduates of the UAB in both learning centres. In addition to this stage, it was analysed official educational documents from the cities education departments, from the Ministry of Education (MEC), Education and the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE).

## RESULTS

In dealing specifically with issues related to the democratization of access to higher education promoted by the UAB and the social role that such policy plays in people's life, as well as in the places where it is inserted, it is important to mention the results in teacher education, initial and continuing education played by UAB in the country, Pará State and in these two municipalities. Considering some geographical aspects and some numbers regarding higher education in the North region and in the state of Pará, the starting point to recall is the ones related the number of public Higher Education Institutions (HEI) and its locations. As mention before, the state has only 6 HEI, which represents only 16%, and most of them are based in the capital region. Another point to be considered is that 70% of the state's population are in backland or in the rural area. According to Alves (2017) UAB consortium, with 88 HEI, had increased, at the end of 2015, the number of vacancies on higher education in more than 736 thousand, which 225 thousand on undergraduate teaching courses and 190 thousand in graduate courses or in continuing education. Additionally, in 2015, almost 375 thousand in-service teachers from primary education needed to complement their degree level; they were teaching without having qualification on the subject they were teaching. Thus, at the end of 2015 UAB had promoted qualification to more than 138 thousand in-service teachers enabling them to teach their subject in primary education according to the required by the Ministry of Education. This data pointed that distance learning

<sup>1</sup>The Gini index measures the extent to which the distribution of income (or, in some cases, consumption expenditure) among individuals or households within an economy deviates from a perfectly equal distribution.

modality and UAB consortium had played a significant role in the process of higher education expansion in Brazil. Thus, accessibility to higher education promoted by UAB is paramount for local development and for improving the quality of basic education. Keeping this in mind, it is worth to highlight the intention to investigate the effects of education, those that go far beyond the so-called direct effects, qualification of the workforce. More important are the indirect ones, because they transcend the preparation of the workforce, they can lead to the critical individual education, leading people to economic and social development. In this sense, higher education has been understood as a way through which nation states seek to achieve higher rates of Human Development Indexes (HDI) and social mobility. Some Studies involving public policies on democratization of access to higher education have been recurrent around the world. Thus, in Brazil, in the last 16 years, UAB's policy has been studied much more because it represents a particular type of education and a system of public universities than for the social role it has been playing in the context in which is occurring. In analyzing the possible social effects produced not only by higher education, but also by public higher education through UAB, the difficulty of access, geographically speaking, and the social issues from local people, UAB is considered the only possibility to achieve a higher education degree. Besides, there is the desire to improve the qualification and the possibility to change life. This statement was presented either in the speech from the graduates who were interviewed, both at the beginning of the course in 2009 and at its end in 2014, and in the questionnaire applied to the graduates and current students in both UAB Learning Centres. For them, UAB plays a transformative role on their life.

The questionnaire shown their believe and conquers. 60% of the students said "to obtain a higher education degree as the greatest achievement, followed by the opportunity to study according to their time at home". For them distance education modality was keen for them to achieve a degree. This may be due to their predominant age group, which was between 24 and 29 years (32.56%), 46.51% are between 30 and 39 years old, 43% are women and only 34% are single. On top of that, they, both men and women, have their lives and families established in the cities in backland, so they could not move to the capital, Belém, to get a college degree. Furthermore, in their view UAB can increase the opportunity of the ones who finished high school to continue education and get better salaries and even get a job. Most of the youth who finishes higher school there was not a chance to have a tertiary degree before UAB Learning Centres in their municipalities. It is important to note the effects brought by face-to-face higher education are different from those promoted by the distance education modality. In addition to the connectivity issues, there is the difficulty to use technologies. Concerning these difficulties, one is related to the distancing of the dialogical model of teaching and learning in face-to-face courses and the other is instrumental questions related to the use of ICT's. However, for many, studying in the distance modality provided contact and knowledge of communication and information technologies. The challenges began by learning to type, then by learning how to use the digital tools required in the distance mode. Even with all the difficulties, faced by the students enrolled, they finished the courses. In a class of 50 freshmen, 38 formed. This is a high index, considering the challenges with time management, socioeconomic and mobility difficulties. However, as Alves (2017, p. 156) points out, the distance modality alone leads to an adequacy of the emancipatory process of study itself.

"if the difficulty concerns the utilitarian issues related to digital tools, learning to use such tools leads to an emancipatory process of the study and the subject, since one cannot start from the premise that the distance course is aimed at a student with a certain autonomy already conquered, a student with discipline of study and schedules".

"It is noted, therefore, that in order to have a critical citizen, with his own and autonomous thinking, holder of his own discourse, capable of specific actions that can modify his life, etc., the fact of having to learn to deal with both dialogical and

instrumental difficulties is important for the process of autonomy and emancipation."

In this sense, and in linguistic terms, presenting an emancipatory posture, in which the subject has the ability to make decisions, to place himself in the face of what is posted, is in line with the education guideline at all levels. In purely linguistic terms, it is worth pointing out that this emancipatory posture (taking the discourse, in which the student manages his position as a subject of his own discourse, therefore, subject of his own actions, acting, thinking, and deciding) is what is required in education and what is expected of it, making him fulfill his social role. Thus, considering the subject emancipation and considering the Capability Approach core idea, of "freedom" advocated by Sen, the subject freedom and the ability to choose what is good for itself. Thus, for the author, expanding access, comprehensiveness and effectiveness of basic education can play an extremely preventive role in reducing almost all types of insecurity. Taking this into consideration, data shown the social mobility achieved by students, especially women. There was 43.90% of women enrolled in the courses, in both learning centres. They pointed that having graduated in higher education provided beyond the recognition of family members, due to these women were the first in the family to obtain a higher education diploma, they started to be seen as an example and thus, influence children, brothers to consider the possibility of having a higher education degree, from a public university. They started to be seen, and be more respected, not only by family's members, but by the society in a differentiated way. This demonstrates the intrinsic value of education studied by Walker (2007, 2008) when she mentions the achievement of agency and the realization of well-being that transcends personal satisfaction, changing life from higher education.

Such changes are mentioned in social and financial terms, which have changed life. In terms of capability, it is noticeable the influence of UAB and, why not say, the distance Education, on the acquired empowerment, in the case of women, from graduation (43.90% are women between 25 and 39 years old, mostly married) when they say: "I started planning and see life differently", talking about her husband she said: "[...] before he did not discuss certain matters with me because he assumed I did not understand" (Alves, 2017, p. 168). Among other things, there are social transformations departing from cultural capital into social and symbolic ones, when she describes the changes in treatment from people at home (children and husband) and school (co-workers). Cultural capital is related to power and the utilitarian aspect related to the possession, for example, certain information, tastes and cultural activities. As Bourdieu describes about the different forms of capital that together are the social classes or multidimensional space from forms of power: economic capital, social capital (contacts) and symbolic capital (prestige). However, the relations between higher education and income improvement are not a new fact, but it cannot be denied that these relationships take on more significant dimensions when we deal with a context of these places that, because they are places in which the supply of work is restricted to schools and other public agencies, in this case, having a higher education degree represents a capital gain.

This statement is reported both by men and women, who recognize in the UAB the opportunity to improve personal life and local development. They recognized the importance of each learning centre has in their town, the role it plays because of what it represents new perspectives and gains. On top of that, they assure the importance of having qualified teachers from their community is essential and worth because they know their reality, needs and after all, their limitation concerning lifestyle, cultural and location, sometimes not understood by those who come from other places. The recognition and legitimation of the UAB by those involved (students, coordinators, tutors, family members), as a new institutional instance in the academic field, contemplating issues of hierarchies, struggles, spaces and agents in the transformation of cultural capital into political and social capital is real. In these places the UAB is the real opportunity to have the higher education as a first or second degree, to improve educational level, and beyond that, the expansion of capacities and

opportunities. Unlike in the South region, in the North region these learning centres are recognized as an extension of the university campus. And so, as Sen, Walker, Unterhalter, and McCowan defend, education and universities fulfill their social role of expanding opportunities and collating with development.

## CONCLUSION

Thinking about UAB and the eventual effects through public higher education and distance learning modality was essential to understand how people, living in remote area see their life. Data are framed in a broader communicational and cultural context because the relationships between people and technological devices have influenced cultural transformations, and thus the way information circulates and is produced, leading to a new understanding of work, citizenship and learning relationships. As Freitas (2009, p.60) points out, "digital literacy, new forms of learning, new conditions of knowledge production, cultural transformations lead to new styles of society in which intelligence is the product of relationships between people and technologies". In this scenario of transformations, the teacher training, face-to-face or distance, achieved UAB, has modified the reality of the people and municipalities where the learning centres are inserted. A critical analysis of the panorama exposed leads to a perspective in which it is seen that, although much has yet to be done in the sense of a real democratization of access to the university, it is not possible to deny the advances in this context, provided by the UAB and the distance modality, since the numbers represent a testimony of the most eloquent testimony. In a context of social and economic contrasts, added to global challenges and the construction of a more just and egalitarian society, distance higher education and HEIs seek to play their social role beyond the production and dissemination of knowledge. It is necessary to investigate the effects of education, the indirect ones, which can lead to the individual critical education leading people to economic and social development. Thus, higher education has been understood as a way through which nation states seek to achieve higher rates of HDI and social mobility.

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