

International Journal of Human Sciences Research

DISTANCE EDUCATION (DE): REFLECTIONS ON THE QUESTIONS OF ANGOLAN MANAGERS ABOUT THEIR IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS

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Abstract: Several managers have questioned how to materialize the Distance Education modality, in order to promote equal and quality education. This article aims to analyze the main questions raised by Angolan managers arising from the first online conference on Distance Education and Hybrid Learning, under the theme Distance Education: A necessary teaching and learning modality in the higher education subsystem in Angola. The foundations and systemic vision of DE served as theoretical support for carrying out this research. The qualitative approach was used as a methodological instrument, participant observation as a technique for data production and idiographic analysis to extract the units of meaning, that is, the managers' questions regarding aspects related to the implementation of DE. It is believed that the reflections found from these questions could serve as a basis to guide and encourage Angolan managers in this process in their HEIs, which are still in the initialization phase. It was found that financial sustainability, both physical and technological infrastructure and the training of human resources to work in this teaching format are critical success factors. Since the quality of education is a complex phenomenon that depends on multiple circumstances, it is unfeasible to solve all education problems by acting only in Higher Education, in the case of DE. The paradigm shift to a student-centered model is also a critical success factor in this process.

Keywords: Distance education. Systemic View. DE management. Angola.

INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, HEIs have been undergoing significant transformations, with emphasis on Distance Education (DE). This has grown potentially, making both public and private HEIs reflect their pedagogical practices. Furthermore, this teaching format has been an alternative for more people to have access to education, with emphasis on higher education.

The evolution of this modality, accompanied by the growing immersion of digital technologies, also boosted the emergence of several professions, expanding access to the job market. The relevance of this teaching modality becomes greater as new layers of the population seek to educate themselves or update themselves professionally due to rapid changes and transformations in all fields of interdisciplinarity.

In the Republic of Angola, a projected population of 36,684,202 inhabitants is estimated (ANGOLA, 2023a). Although there is a significant increase in HEIs, courses, teachers and students enrolled in the higher education subsystem, the enrollment rate for those aged 18 to 24 is relatively low. According to the 2019 Statistical Yearbook, for every 100,000 inhabitants, 1022 students are enrolled in this education subsystem (ANGOLA, 2019).

However, there is insufficient relevance for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), both public and private, to absorb more students. Every year thousands of students are left out of the higher education subsystem, since face-to-face teaching, the only modality in operation, generates pent-up demand in this field.

Some initiatives by the Angolan executive have been implemented as human capital development strategies. As an example, the Conecta Angola program stands out, which refers to an Internet service to facilitate areas that are difficult to access. This project aims to

ensure the interconnection of all Angolans, as this becomes more viable with the resources of the Satellite - ANGOSAT-2. Currently, the mobile telephone service has grown by 55% and the Internet by 20% in the last three years (ANGOLA, 2023b). However, such initiatives need to be better directed to the education sector, with a view to democratization and quality of education. Most Angolan public HEIs are still facing several challenges, with emphasis on the absence of teachers in certain subjects, computer laboratories, physical and virtual libraries and, finally, the absence of wireless Internet for a large part of the student community.

It is worth emphasizing here how relevant it is to create connectivity and infrastructure policies to improve the quality of the educational process. It is essential that there are conditions for the teaching-learning process to be conducted with the quality necessary to fulfill the proposed objectives of the Angolan government, which aim to ensure the training and qualification of human resources that meet the development needs in the face of challenges of the country, as highlighted by Silva (2016). This is how distance education comes as a complement to face-to-face teaching, with the aim of contributing to achieving these objectives.

Among the main challenges to institutionalizing DE in Angolan HEIs, the lack of a strategic instrument capable of making this process viable stands out, that is, a document capable of making the public policy of DE become a reality. This aspect deserves full attention, as it is closely linked to the main questions faced by managers of Angolan public HEIs.

The decree regulating DE was approved on March 3, 2020 (ANGOLA, 2020) and, therefore, becomes a favorable condition for the viability of this process. It must also be noted that no Angolan HEI has yet managed to

make the distance education modality a reality in the country. This has perhaps been the main concern demonstrated by most managers of Angolan HEIs, which motivates the writing of this article. These agents want to manage in an amateur way, based on the principles of business management or management completely rooted in face-to-face teaching, as mentioned (MILL, 2013). For the author, it refers to one that is not oriented from the perspective of managing distance education systems, which has still been adopted by some Brazilian managers in this segment.

Therefore, it is worth highlighting the guiding questions when the subject refers to the process of managing distance education systems, as asked by Mill (2013):

Who is the DE manager? What must you know? How is DE management composed? Is DE management similar to traditional management? What particularities can be indicated for the management of virtual distance education? What aspects must a good manager manage or be aware of?

These issues have been the cause of concern for most Angolan managers who intend to implement DE.

For this reason, this article aims to analyze the main questions raised by Angolan managers arising from the first online conference on Distance Education and Hybrid Learning, as previously mentioned. Based on these questions, we sought to find reflections, with the aim of guiding and stimulating Angolan educational managers in the process of implementing this teaching modality.

Thus, the work is structured into three sections, namely: Distance Education: Concept and Systemic Vision, Research Methodology, which brings the qualitative approach as a methodological instrument, Participant Observation as a technique for data production and, finally, the Ideographic Analysis to generate units of meaning, that is, the main questions of managers in relation to

the aspects of an DE system, extracted from the aforementioned conference.

DISTANCE EDUCATION: CONCEPT AND SYSTEMIC VISION

There are several definitions for DE. In this research, we adopted the definition of DE in accordance with Presidential Decree No. 59/20 of March 3 (ANGOLA, 2020), based on the 3rd article, under the terms of paragraph b):

A teaching modality predominantly taught through a massive and bidirectional technological communication and training system, which replaces personal interaction in the classroom between teacher and students as the preferred method of teaching-learning, with the systematic and joint action of various didactic resources and the support from a tutorial organization, which provides students with independent learning.

This systematic action, in the view of Moore and Kearsley (2013), is very useful for understanding distance education as a field of study and adopting it reflects the secret of successful practice.

On the other hand, figure 1 presents the main component processes of an DE system. Regardless of the type of institution, Moore and Kearsley (2013) argue that there is always a system capable of encompassing all or most of the elements listed in this illustration. According to these authors, there must always be: a source of knowledge and teaching of the content, that is, an educational institution, with teaching staff and other resources to make the content available; a course creation subsystem to structure this knowledge into materials and activities for students; a subsystem that offers the course to students through media and technology; instructors and support staff who interact with students as they use these materials; students in

their distinct environments; a management subsystem to organize policy, analyze needs, allocate resources, evaluate results, and coordinate other subsystems.

For the people responsible for directing and managing the resources necessary to deliver quality distance education programs, it is essential to think about a strategy for subsequent implementation. Such a strategy must contain the following activities (MOORE; KEARSLEY, 2013): define the vision, mission, goals and objectives of the institution or program related to distance education; choose options so that priority goals can be achieved with acceptable quality and available resources; continually evaluate changing trends in the demands of students, companies and society; monitor emerging technological options that can bring greater efficiency; project future resource and capital needs and adopt measures to achieve them.

Mill (2013) reinforces the above, stating that, when thinking about an DE system, four essential aspects must be considered: the design of DE, democratization and flexibility, taking into consideration, the principles, the organizational management of DE and available resources.

However, Mill and Pimentel (2013) argue that defining public policies and interinstitutional guidelines requires an effort from leaders, especially due to the resistance that the distance education modality suffers from the academic community, the necessary change of mentality about what it means to teach and learning in contemporary times.

METHODOLOGY

This research takes a qualitative approach as a methodological line, participant observation as a technique used to produce the respective data and idiographic analysis to extract the units of meaning, that is, it concerns the questions of managers in relation to aspects

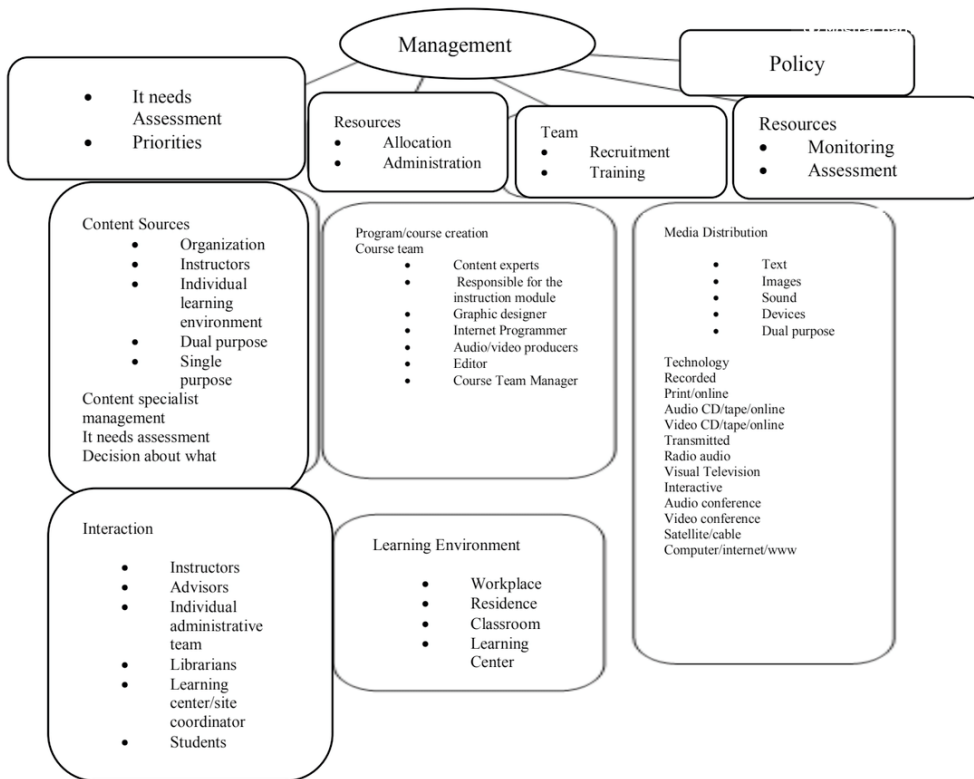


Figure 1 – DE Systemic Model

Source: Adapted from Moore and Kearsley (2013, p,13)

concerning implementation from DE.

According to Minayo (1996), qualitative research addresses very peculiar approaches, as it is in tune with the universe of meanings, reasons, interests, beliefs, values and attitudes. For the author, this provides an environment with more depth of relationships, processes and phenomena.

For Santos and Costa (2015), this type of research can be manifested in the online environment, to answer particular questions that characterize a reality, and must rely on various data collection instruments, such as questionnaires, interviews, logbooks, transcription, focus groups and observation. This last item, according to Gil (2019), takes three forms: spontaneous, systematic and participant observation. On the other hand, in idiographic analysis, the researcher finds and grants meanings, using various ways of understanding. As argued by Paulo, Amaral

and Santiago (2010), this analysis is carried out in the subjects' statements, seeking to identify the units of meaning, that is, the expressions that make sense to the researcher, seeking to understand the sayings of the research subjects.

The empirical context presented in this work reflects participant observation within an online interaction scenario, which concerns the holding of the 1st Online Conference on Distance Education and Hybrid Teaching in Angola. The event took place, via the Zoom platform, under the theme "DE in Angola: a necessary teaching and learning modality in the higher education subsystem in Angola", during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This event had two main objectives. The first was to demonstrate how DE mediated by Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) could contribute to the solution and structuring of educational

activities so that face-to-face teaching is not completely paralyzed. The second objective sought to address the relevance, impact and relevance of implementing DE and Hybrid Learning in the aforementioned subsystem.

Furthermore, the event's target audience was HEI managers, with a total of 40 participants, presided over by the Minister of Higher Education, Science, Technology and Innovation, flanked by the Secretaries of State of the aforementioned regulatory body. It is also noteworthy that the researcher was the speaker at the event, in which he also played the role of artificial participant observer, as he joined the group for the purpose of carrying out the investigation (Gil, 2019).

The adoption of participant observation was used as a technique to produce data, which, using the Zoom platform, transcribed the main questions asked by participating managers about the DE implementation process. Through idiographic analysis, we

extract the units of meaning, that is, the participants' statements or questions. Finally, for each question, we sought to find possible reflections or answers, respectively.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

After transcribing the participants' speeches, 5 tables were created consisting of two columns, with the first column containing the alphanumeric codes (Manager1, for example) and the respective units of meaning, that is, the questions regarding the implementation process of DE under the systemic view of Moore and Kearsley (2013). On the other hand, in the second column, assertions or reflections articulated based on these questions were placed, with the aim of finding what each manager wanted to express with their speech. In short, we sought answers or reflections on what was said by the research participants, based on the researcher's experience.

Units of Meaning/Inquiry	Reflection
Manager1 – “I would just like to know, taking into consideration, your experience that tells us or reinforces this vision of managing the interaction process, interactive dynamics, whether synchronous or asynchronous and above all from your point of view, what type of platform or what type of tool can we use to test an DE experience in our HEIs?	Moodle is recommended because it is open source, so it can be customized depending on your university. It is the platform most used by public and private HEIs in Brazil and other countries. However, when it is installed, it is incomplete, lacking enormous resources (modules or plug-ins) for its proper functioning. However, there are more consistent platforms such as BlackBoard and Canvas, which already integrate other tools, with emphasis on virtual laboratories, virtual and augmented reality, used for more complex courses, such as Medicine, Physics, for example.

Table 1: Manager 1's units of meaning

Source: Prepared by the author, based on research carried out.

Units of Meaning/Inquiry	Reflection
Manager 2: “In our HEI, at this stage we are in, we had some classes with our distance students and the big problem was monitoring the distance students, whether they are actually attending classes, or whether other people are who are taking their turn. Here in Africa or Brazil, how is this process handled so that we can have some experience. What is the affection between the teacher?	It is difficult to have absolute control over students when they are on the other side (virtually). When teaching remotely, via the web, the student on the other side will ask their questions, as we are doing here on the Zoom platform. It is possible to at least feel that he is on the other side interacting, due to the way he is involved. It's difficult to measure, in my opinion. Because he may not be present at the moment and watch the recording at another time.

Table 2: Manager 2's units of meaning

Source: Prepared by the author, based on research carried out.

Units of Meaning/Inquiry	Reflection
Manager 3: "I think it is important to clarify the issue of the minimum necessary assumptions that an HEI must comply with, observe, in order to materialize this in practice. I know he talked a little about the hardware and software components and I think there is a question of bandwidth."	Before an HEI begins DE activities, it must be accredited or authorized by the regulatory body. Thus, the regulations already contain consistent elements so that a certain HEI meets its criteria and begins its services. I think the first steps would be to create a strategic project for DE. So, it must exist in this design phase, which will be defined or implemented in the HEI's pedagogical model based on the following items: types of learning theory, target audience, student profile, course objectives, which resources are used to create the content, the type of interaction and evaluation, etc. And above all, I think that the IES must have a body to deal only with DE. After all, it has its own characteristics. Regarding the issue of communication infrastructure, one must think about the institutional and student reality.

Table 3: Manager 3's units of meaning

Source: Prepared by the author, based on research carried out.

Units of Meaning/Inquiry	Reflection
Manager 4- "There is an essential issue here, which is in relation to costs. Brazil already had DE in the early 80s. Before using the Internet, they used books, mp3s, etc. And I'm not confusing distance education with correspondence teaching. Is it possible to do DE without having to worry about the Internet? And given the characteristics of distance education, taking into consideration, the pace of learning, how can we reconcile this with the academic calendar?"	In the absence of the Internet, you can opt for other DE models such as (video education, tele education via satellite, or with learning hubs or centers (I think it is more appropriate). You can opt for Offline Learning systems, although this leaves the more complex management system.

Table 4: Units of meaning of Manager 4.

Source: Prepared by the author, based on research carried out.

Units of Meaning/Inquiry	Reflection
Manager5 - "There is a question that is common to almost everyone. What will be the first steps, how do you evaluate our HEIs? What would be the first steps to move forward in relation to the implementation of DE? Can it start at this time of the COVID-19 crisis? What is your idea?"	Several steps can be performed simultaneously. The first thing I recommend is that the HEI must think about understanding the context or reality of their HEI. Each HEI must begin to train its teaching staff in specific skills to perform in DE, such as the use of digital technologies essential to DE and how to prepare teaching material, as well as employing active methodologies and Hybrid Teaching, etc. However, each HEI must reinvent itself, seek innovation, exploring the various existing Hybrid Teaching models. However, each HEI must begin to set up a working group/core to define the conception of DE as a teaching modality, in order to invest in the creation of a pedagogical project focused on DE.

Table 5: Units of meaning of Manager 5

Source: Prepared by the author, based on research carried out.

As can be seen in the units of meaning, that is, in the managers' questions, it is possible to note their concern regarding aspects related to the implementation of distance education. Such questions show that "a web of interrelated elements is the fundamental basis for quality in education, in general, and in the distance education modality in particular". (CORTELAZO, 2013, p. 27). It is understood that, in this research, although it is not possible to cover all aspects relating to the process of implementing the DE phenomenon, due to its complexity DE, this research can serve as a guide and stimulus for Angolan educational managers who aim to embark on this endeavor, since they are still in the initialization phase.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The discussions presented here show that there is an urgent need to migrate to a reality where other teaching formats must simultaneously be inserted into the education system, with a view to democratization and the quality of education in this country. It is also evident that, based on the units of meaning or questions presented, Angolan HEIs must be able to mobilize new resources, to reinvent themselves, as the challenge is the preparation, training and creation of self-learning work groups to that can try out small experiments.

Furthermore, there must be financial resources, as doing DE is an expensive process. This

implies high investment from various perspectives, in accordance with a systemic approach. On the other hand, it is essential to create conditions for students, who are the reason for being of HEIs, with emphasis on those who are in situations of social vulnerability, which is the majority.

Another important aspect to be considered is that digital technologies are essential, but they are not the only condition that allows complex problems such as education to be solved, since, when the student arrives in higher education, this already comes from previous education.

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