

# THE EVALUATION OF A HIGHER EDUCATION DISTANCE EDUCATION COURSE

Maria Eugenia Witzler D'Esposito  
*Applied Linguist and Education Consultant*  
BRAZIL

## Abstract

The aim of this paper is to present the evaluation process Higher Education Institutions go through in Brazil when offering distance education courses at graduate and post-graduate levels. The paper highlights the main aspects of the legislation, discusses what the accreditation processes entail, presents a graduate course (a teaching qualification), the evaluation instrument, and the feedback received, and concludes with some final considerations on the process experienced.

## Distance Education Legislation in Brazil: An Overview

Distance education has been defined, for courses at all levels, as any educational mode in which the didactic-pedagogical mediation in the teaching and learning processes happens via the use of information communication technologies (ICT), that would allow students and teachers to do educational activities at different locations and time<sup>1</sup> (Brazilian Federal Decree n° 5622/2005)<sup>2</sup>. Two subsequent documents, the Brazilian Federal Decree n° 9057/2017 and the Brazilian Regulatory Ordinance n° 11/2017 established the norms for the accreditation of Higher Education Institutions (HEI) as distance education centers, and the authorization to offer courses at graduate and post-graduate levels.

The Regulation and Supervision Higher Education Office (Secretaria de Regulação e Supervisão da Educação Superior – SERES) is responsible for politics to regulate and supervise HEI. It was created by Brazilian Federal Decree n° 7.480/2011, and the office is responsible for authorizing, accrediting and renewing accreditations to HEI and courses (face-to-face and distance graduate and post-graduate courses), to guarantee that the legislation is followed, and courses are up to standard. Upon the request of HEI, SERES designates evaluation committees to visit them.

HEI should have the institution and the courses accredited by SERES and revalidate accreditations on a regular basis. The accreditation, validation, or revalidation processes comprise a few steps: a formal request to the Ministry of Education, the presentation of documents, an official visit, the publication of a report, the validation of this report by SERES supervisors, a statement with a final decision, and an official publication of the Diário Oficial da União<sup>3</sup> [Federal Official

Journal]. The documents requested are related to the infra-structure (physical and technological), financial, and pedagogical aspects of the HEI and courses.

Three are the main institutional documents<sup>4</sup> that guide the HEI work and organization:

- Institutional Development Plan (IDP): describes the goals, development and management plans of the HEI considering its identity, philosophy, mission, pedagogical guidelines, organizational structure, and academic activities. Every five years the plan is revised considering the main performance indicators that result from the institutional evaluations.
- Institutional Pedagogic Project (IPP): a political, philosophical, and theoretical-methodological document that describes the institution policies (regarding teaching, research, extension courses, social inclusion, attending students with specific needs, affirmative actions, and distance education) and academic practices described at the IDP.
- Course Political-pedagogic Project (CPP): recalls the institutional development plan and pedagogic project main aspects, and presents the course views, curriculum, design, structure, evaluation system, policies, student's profile, teachers' profile and allocation, and teaching programs.

The visit/evaluation is paid by the committee members to inspect the documents provided, and hold meetings with the HEI community (principal, coordinators, teachers, tutors, students, technical personnel, librarian, human resources department, IT, e-learning and multidisciplinary teams, financial department, legal department, maintenance, members of the community) to gather evidence for the report.

## The Context, Course Objective and Students' Profile

The HEI is part of a 85-year-old nonprofit organization which aims at the teaching-learning of English in Brazil. It has offered courses since 2014 and it aims at the education of English language professionals (teachers and translators). It has two face-to-face graduate courses and specialization courses, and a series of extension courses in the face-to-face, hybrid, remote, and online formats.

The Teaching Qualification in Languages – English is a distance education graduate course, aligned with the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills and learning agenda as well as the pillars of education proposed by UNESCO (Delors, 1996), and aims at educating professionals able to: (a) theoretically and critically reflect about the language structure and use (aware of the linguistic and cultural variations, considering the psychological, educational, social, historical, cultural, political, and ideological

aspects); (b) know about methods and teaching techniques, and how to critically apply them; (c) use information communication technologies (ICT) for education; and (d) understand their own education as a nonstop process.

## Curriculum Organization, Learning-teaching Methodologies, and Support Groups

The methodology seeks to integrate theory and practice, digital inclusion, and continuous formative assessment, allowing the future teacher to critically reflect upon his/her contextualized teaching practices using ICT. The relationship among teacher, student, and tutor is of great importance once it leads to the development of skills. Innovative practices are also a high priority once they stimulate investigation, creativity, and critical spirit, relying on contextualized real-life experiences that will help the future teacher to develop strategies to search for, analyze and interpret information, by thinking of and experimenting with possible solutions in an autonomous way.

The curriculum is organized around 2,160 hours of subjects (general, specific, pedagogical, and specific pedagogical contents), 200 hours of extra-activities (academic-scientific-cultural), 400 hours of supervised internship, 432 hours of pedagogical practices, a final paper, and 288 hours of tutoring sessions to maximize students' education, allowing flexibility and exposure to practical experiences—thus integrating theory, practice, and research in an interdisciplinary view.

The extra-activities aim at expanding the students' academic, scientific, and cultural repertoire so that students build knowledge and attitudes in order to be critical, reflexive professionals. The norms and regulations are established by the HEI, but it is up to the students to decide on the sort of activities that they are going to attend.

The internship program at years 3 and 4 allows students to go back to school and understand the learning-teaching process based on the theory they have been exposed to. Students observe and analyze classes from theoretical and methodological perspectives, teach (produce and discuss lesson plans considering methods and techniques to achieve objectives for various groups), get feedback on the teaching practices, and take part in other school routines. The number of hours follows the Brazilian legislation. To experience academic writing, at year 4, students have to write a final paper under supervision and submit it to peer review.

Tutoring are weekly sessions that focus on students' academic, personal, and professional development. In years 1 and 2 the objective is to help them develop academic and professional skills by working on aspects such as learning strategies,

critical reading, oral and written academic genres, plagiarism, ethics, neutral discourse, multiliteracies, digital literacy. In years 3 and 4, the sessions focus on helping students to reflect upon their internship experiences to think about possible professional paths to take, according to their needs, wishes, and profile.

Throughout the course students rely on a Support and Guidance Group that aims at avoiding dropouts by providing: (a) general information on the HEI: development plan, curriculum, organizational structure, library regulations, infrastructure, and legal procedures; (b) psycho-pedagogical support to those struggling to adapt into academic life; (c) pedagogical support (individual or group extra studies and classes) with a monitor; (d) free online courses to those struggling at reading and writing; (e) extra classes and guidance to those considering stopping the course due to academic difficulties; (f) workshops on ICT, systems or tools used in the HEI, how to organize the academic routine, and (g) induction sessions on the VLE: access, organization and tools.

## The Instructional Design

As Wood (2019) points out, instructional design “is a systematic approach to creating a learning intervention and/or environment that facilitates learner achievement of knowledge, skills and abilities” (p. 2), encompassing “the analysis of learning problems and the management of instructional and non-instructional processes and resources intended to improve learning and performance in a variety of settings” (p. 2). The systematic design enables active and engaging participation and learning regardless of the type of content. The systematic approach “is not intended to replace valid educational practices but to enhance and improve the entire teaching and learning experience” (Wood, 2019, p. 3).

According to Branch (2018), instructional design has six characteristics: (1) it is learner-centered focusing on what learners need in terms of materials, resources, activities, and interactions; (2) it is goal-oriented so what learners are expected to achieve is clearly articulated at course level and at specific tasks; (3) it focuses on meaningful performance, that is, the relevance of materials, strategies, and active learning methods that lead students to apply knowledge and skills when simulating or performing in authentic situations; (4) it allows outcomes to be measured in a reliable and valid way, with authentic assessment using various methods to assure that learning is significant, meaningful, and relevant, with learners demonstrating that they can go beyond the accumulation and reporting of factual and conceptual knowledge; (5) it is empirical, iterative and self-correcting, with continuous data collection (from the initial analysis stage up to the implementation); and (6) it is a team effort that counts with the collaborative effort of an educator’s content and an instructional designer’s expertise to ensure that the course content is learner-centered, meaningful and measurable.

When thinking of the distance education course instructional design, the Teacher's Nucleus (TN) considered the aspects mentioned and aimed at knowledge construction and learning occurring by experimentation and gain of abilities, by learners joining the virtual learning environment (VLE) to do collaborative work, aware of the responsibilities, roles, rules, norms, and patterns of interaction (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). Based on their experience with the face-to-face course as well as other teacher education courses taught in the face-to-face, hybrid, remote and online courses, the teachers were aware of the students' needs. Driscoll (1998), Berge et al., (2000), Abbey (2000), Fullmer-Umari (2000) and Horton (2000) refer to this as a key element for a successful design, once it helps to define the implicit learning theories, methods, the different phases the learner will go through and the tools to be used.

Clarity, quality, and quantity of the materials, defined objectives and deadlines, adequate amount of time to the activities, rules, roles, and procedures, students' attitude towards the course (commitment, responsibility, participation), and feedback were also considered. The type of program was taken into account considering the VLE and the expected number of students with a combination of *web/computer-based training* (individual learning with drills and practice, simulations, reading, questioning, and answering); *web/electronic performance support system* (just-in-time training with problem-solving activities, scientific, experiential or project methods); *web/virtual asynchronous classroom* (non-real-time group learning through experiential tasks, discussions, and team projects); and *web/virtual synchronous classroom* (real-time collaborative group learning through discussions, problem solving, and reflection) (Driscoll, 1998, p.26).

The traditional ADDIE model of instructional design (introduced by Branson et al., 1975) was considered once it involves (1) analysis - identification of needs, technological infrastructure and media; objectives definition, and students' profile delineation; (2) design - establishment of curricula, team and schedule; selection of pedagogical and technological strategies; (3) development - pedagogical and technological definitions; production and adaptation of material, and teachers and tutors formation; (4) implementation - application of the proposal; (5) evaluation - analysis of the course, system, technological and pedagogical structures.

## The Virtual Learning Environment

Moodle is the VLE chosen by the institution as its tools align with the course methodology, making it possible to have opportunities of practice and meaningful feedback - following progress and performance. It allows the integration of multiple medias and resources (such as manuals, welcome video, a tutorial on the VLE), the display of content and information in an organized

and safe way, and the interaction among participants and learning objects. The VLE is free, constantly updated, easy to operate, and a friendly and safe environment. It has got a reliable control system, and it integrates with other systems (library and office, for example), accessibility and communication tools, and programs used by the HEI.

## The Subjects' Organization and Delivery

Considering the context, the course objective, the students' profile, the curriculum organization, learning-teaching methodologies, the instructional design, and the VLE, each subject at Moodle will be organized in six different interconnected blocks:

- study and reading materials: every two weeks students will have access to texts from virtual libraries, online journals, open educational resources (OERs), or written material specially created for them<sup>5</sup>.
- pre-recorded lessons: every week students will have access to lessons which have been previously recorded by the teachers, that will explore the content of the study and reading materials as well as expand on the topics. The aim is to provide elements that could generate rich discussions and critical reflection. For each study and reading material, there will be two pre-recorded lessons.
- closed activities: every week, students will have specific content comprehension activities, focusing on the study and reading materials and the pre-recorded lessons. These are compulsory self-contained and individual activities with automated feedback (providing the rationale behind and the necessary explanations). This block will also display two compulsory evaluation tasks at weeks 5 and 11 that will correspond to 20% of the students' final grade (the final evaluation will be face-to-face to meet the Brazilian distance education legislation and will correspond to 60% of the final grade).
- expansion activities: open asynchronous activities offered every two weeks in which students will apply concepts, in interactive and dialogical discussion forums, to expand reflection, under the guidance of the teacher or tutors to mediate discussions.
- synchronous activities: interactive classes or sessions to expand on topics or to help students via zoom, at pre-determined dates and hours (morning, afternoon, and evening to attend various needs).
- extra-curricular activities: every week links to OERs, webpages, or cultural programs aiming at increasing students' exposure to language and cultural activities to enrich their education will be available.

Promotion is linked to students' performance in the evaluations and participation in the course activities. A minimal final grade of 7 (out of 10) and 75% of participation in the activities in the VLE is required.

Teachers are responsible for the subjects' content and program, the study and reading materials, the pre-recorded lessons, the activities (closed, expansion and synchronous), the evaluation, and the organization of it all at the VLE. Tutors are responsible for checking the organization and for the delivery: releasing materials and activities, following students' progress, checking evaluations, contacting students, and establishing a connection among students, tutors, and teachers.

## The Evaluation Instrument

The evaluation committees are composed by two members trained by SERES and their aim is to guarantee that the HEI follow the legislation and pre-requisites for quality education. At the end of the visit, the committee members fill in an instrument, which will generate a report, based on the evidence gathered via documents (IDP, IPP, CPP, among others) and meetings. It has 30 overall questions for a preliminary analysis, followed by indicators in four dimensions. A grade<sup>6</sup> is awarded to each indicator at dimensions 1, 2 and 3, and evidence has to be provided to justify the grade. Three is the minimum required to offer courses, and once the report is available, the HEI may accept it or ask for a revision before the report is sent to SERES supervisors for validation.

*Dimension 1* analyses the didactic-pedagogical organization via 24 indicators: (1) institutional policies; (2) course objectives; (3) student's professional profile; (4) curriculum structure; (5) curriculum components; (6) methodology; (7 to 9) supervised internship, its relation to basic education, theory and practice; (10) extra-activities; (11) final paper; (12) support to students; (13) internal and external evaluation processes and course management; (14) tutoring activities; (15) knowledge, abilities, and attitudes to do tutoring activities; (16) ICT in the teaching-learning process; (17) the VLE; (18) didactic material; (19) follow up and evaluation of the teaching-learning processes; (20) number of applicants; (21) integration with the public educational system; (22) integration with the public health system; (23) practical activities for courses on the health field; and (24) practical activities for courses on the teaching qualification field.

*Dimension 2* focuses on teachers and tutoring, and there are 15 indicators: (1) TN; (2) multidisciplinary team; (3) coordinator's role; (4) coordinator's working hours and contract; (5) teachers' education and academic title; (6) teachers' working hours and contract; (7) teachers' professional experience (non-applicable for teaching qualification courses); (8) teachers' experience at basic education (applicable only for teaching qualification courses); (9) teachers' experience at

higher education; (10) teachers' experience at teaching at distance education; (11) teachers' tutoring experience at distance education, (12) teachers' participation at SB, Collegium, and TN; (13) tutors' education and academic title; (14) tutors' experience at distance education; (15) interaction among teachers, tutors and coordinator.

*Dimension 3* has 16 indicators to analyze the infrastructure: (1 to 3) teachers and coordinator working spaces; (4) classrooms; (5) IT equipment; (6 and 7) library; (8 to 13, 15, 16) labs; (14) didactic material production and distribution.

*Dimension 4* focuses on final considerations with items addressing the committee members, the HEI and course general information, the documents used, and a short qualitative analysis on each dimension.

## The Evaluation

HEI are informed about the inspection visits and the committee members a month in advance. The inspection visit lasts two days and at the moment they are virtual due to the pandemic, via Teams meetings. Day 1 is for meetings and a guided video tour to show the HEI premises, while Day 2 is for the committee members' work. The coordinator and principal should be available at all times. Access to a drive containing the documents requested, the library and the VLE should be given the committee members a week before the visit. The report is uploaded at the Ministry of Education platform at about five days after the visit is over.

At the beginning of June, The Teaching Qualification in Languages – English graduate course got 4.39 as a final grade: 4.50 at dimension 1 (didactic-pedagogical organization); 4.71 at dimension 2 (teachers and tutoring); and 4.13 at dimension 3 (infrastructure).

Table 1 shows the grades for the indicators.

**Table 1**

*Dimensions, Indicators, and Corresponding Grades*

Dimension 1: didactic-pedagogical organization	4.5
Indicator	Grade
institutional policies	4
course objectives	5
student's professional profile	5
curriculum structure	4
curriculum components	4
methodology	5



Dimension 1: didactic-pedagogical organization	4.5
Indicator	Grade
supervised internship	4
extra-activities	5
final paper	5
support to students	4
evaluation processes & course management	5
tutoring activities	5
knowledge, abilities, and attitudes to do tutoring	5
ICT in the teaching-learning process	4
the VLE	5
didactic material	4
follow up and evaluation of the teaching-learning processes	5
number of applicants	4
integration with the public educational system, public health system, practical activities for courses on the health field	non-applicable
practical activities for courses on the teaching qualification field	5
Dimension 2: teachers and tutoring	4.71
Indicator	Grade
TN	5
multidisciplinary team	4
coordinator's role	5
coordinator's working hours and contract	
teachers: working hours and contract, professional experience, experience at basic education, experience at higher education, experience at teaching at distance education, tutoring experience at distance education, participation at SB, Collegium, and TN	5
tutors' education and academic title	5
tutors' experience at distance education	4
interaction among teachers, tutors and coordinator	5
Dimension 3: infrastructure	4.13
Indicator	Grade
working spaces	3
classroom	4
IT equipment	4
library	5
labs	non-applicable
didactic material production and distribution	4

Now, the report is at SERES for validation.

## Final Considerations

HEI are used for the accreditation, validation, revalidation processes. We believe the processes are important for the Ministry of Education to know about the courses being offered and the HEI structures and beliefs. However, we believe a few aspects deserve some attention and perhaps should be reconsidered. One of the aspects regards the documents and the drive the evaluators have access to. Hundreds of documents are provided, and hundreds of files are created and shared. For this visit the principal created/organized and uploaded more than nine hundred files (videos, PowerPoint presentations, manuals, infographics, Excel files, and pdf files –some of these files had more than 200 pages each). Just a few of them are mentioned in the report as evidence of the indicators.

The evaluators, via the report, do not provide HEI insights, feedback, or suggestions on how to improve the course instructional design, the curriculum, the course implementation and the material, for example. A grade from 1 (non-existent) to 5 (excellent) is attributed, but comments or suggestions on how to present excellence in the future are not given.

The descriptors are up to a certain point open and vague as they often include words such as ‘innovative’ and ‘successful’, leading to interpretations that may vary according to the evaluator. Therefore, as descriptors are subjective, grades may also be subjective, depending on the evaluator interpretation. An innovative and successful practice in a certain region of Brazil, for example, may not be considered as such in other areas, as it is a huge country and full of contrasts.

As mentioned, the HEI must have the institution and the courses accredited by SERES. In April, 2021 we requested for the accreditation of the HEI but it is still on hold. We are about to have the permission to implement the online graduate course, but we do not know when the institution will be accredited to offer distance education. We cannot predict how long the accreditation, validation or revalidation processes take, but they usually last 2 to 3 years.

## Notes

1. Here and elsewhere, translations from Portuguese are those of the author.
2. Brazilian Federal Decree nº 5622/2005 regulates article 80 of Law 9.394/96 (Brasil, 1996).
3. *Diário Oficial da União* is a document published online by the federal government on a daily basis to make public information regarding three sectors: (1) regulatory acts; (2) personal acts (nominations, for example),

and (3) contracts, commissions, notices.  
<https://www.gov.br/imprensa nacional/pt-br>

4. The IDP and IPP are devised by the HEI Principal following National Guidelines and the organization businesses plans. The Teachers' Nucleus (TN), which is composed by teachers and principal, is responsible for the CPP. The IDP and IPP are approved by the Senior Board (SB), Collegium, and TN. The SB focuses on the didactic and scientific aspects and has the principal, the coordinator, teachers, students, a representative of the technical team, and the community as members. The Collegium focuses on the courses and has the principal, the coordinator, teachers, and students as members. The CPP is approved by the SB and Collegium.
5. At first, the aim is to work with study and reading material such as papers, book chapters, books, OERs, images, figures, videos, texts from webpages etc. If along the implementation the need for specially designed didactic material is felt, it will be elaborated by experts in the field, under teachers' supervision, following the course programs. They will follow an instructional project aligned to the HEI methodology and will be supervised and validated by the multidisciplinary team. Accessibility for the impaired will be secured in both cases.
6. Grades are awarded to each indicator and criteria provided: 1 (non-existent), 2 (insufficient), 3 (sufficient), 4 (very good), 5 (excellent). Below is an example.

Indicator 1.3	Grade	Criteria descriptors
Students' Professional Profile	1	The professional profile does not mention the students' competencies.
	2	The professional profile mentions insufficiently the students' competencies.
	3	The professional profile mentions sufficiently the students' competencies.
	4	The professional profile mentions very well the students' competencies.
	5	The professional profile mentions in an excellent way the students' competencies.

Evidence:

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## Author Details

Maria Eugenia Witzler D'Esposito

Brazil

[eugeniadesposito@gmail.com](mailto:eugeniadesposito@gmail.com)