

Connecting knowledge: the evolution of the Distance Education Research Network

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Abstract: This article deals with the trajectory of the Distance Education Research Network (*Rede Pesquisa EaD*), from its creation in 2015 to its current internationalization process. It has been found that through dialogue and exchange among researchers, mechanisms have been established to improve distance education on a critical-social basis references.

Keywords: EaD; Research Network; Trajectory.

Conectando saberes: a evolução da Rede de Pesquisa Educação a Distância

Resumo: Este artigo trata da trajetória da Rede de Pesquisa Educação a Distância (*Rede Pesquisa EaD*) desde a sua criação em 2015 até o seu atual processo de internacionalização. Verificou-se que, mediante o diálogo e o intercâmbio entre os pesquisadores, estabeleceram-se mecanismos potencializadores para que a educação a distância fosse estabelecida em bases crítico-social referenciadas.

Palavras-chave: EaD; Rede de Pesquisa; Trajetória



Conectando saberes: la evolución de la ls Red de Investigación de Educación a Distancia

Resumen: Este artículo trata sobre la trayectoria de la Red de Investigación en Educación a Distancia (Red de Investigación EaD) desde su creación en 2015 hasta su actual proceso de internacionalización. Se ha constatado que, a través del diálogo y el intercambio entre los investigadores, se han establecido mecanismos que potencian el establecimiento de la educación a distancia sobre bases crítico-sociales.

Palabras clave: EaD; Red de Investigación; Trayectoria

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1 INTRODUCTION

The Distance Education Research Network (*Rede Pesquisa EaD*) was founded in 2015, associated with the Group of Studies and Research in Technologies and Distance Education (GEaD/CNPq) of the Faculty of Education of the Federal University of Goiás (FE/UFG) and, in its current version, supported by the Association of Universities in Network (UniRede). For almost a decade, this network has been working to promote participation, access, and exchange of scientific knowledge among researchers and different actors involved in Distance Education (EaD), both nationally and internationally.

Therefore, understanding the trajectory of the Distance Education Research Network, and highlighting its evolution from its creation to its internationalization is fundamental not only to review the results achieved by the implemented versions and their contributions to the field of Distance Education but also to provide relevant information for the elaboration of strategies that can promote the development and strengthening of the modality.

For the analysis, a qualitative, exploratory, and descriptive methodology is used, with a bibliographic review, aiming to understand the historical evolution of distance education in the Midwest region of Brazil and to identify the authors who deal with the subject. This approach seeks to synthesize and critically evaluate the knowledge produced on a specific topic, through the analysis of previously identified scientific literature, as recommended by Lima and Mioto (2007).

In addition, the documentary research technique is used to analyze the memories of meetings, projects, and activity reports of the *Rede Pesquisa EaD*, a technique that has allowed expanding the understanding of the intrinsic, social, and cultural objects of these documents, according to the procedure indicated by Sá-Silva, Almeida and Guindana (2009).

The data collected were subjected to a qualitative study, emphasizing the changes that occurred over time in the composition of the network, the objectives that guided it, the activities it developed, and the partnerships signed with other institutions. Thus, it was possible to identify the main results achieved by the Distance Education Research Network in the Midwest Region over time, highlighting the milestones and contributions to the advancement of knowledge in the field.

The article is divided into three topics: the first one presents the trajectory that goes from the creation of the Study Group on Distance Education (GEaD) to the consolidation of the *Rede Pesquisa EaD*; the second one deals with the genesis, that is, the origin and creation of the network in the Midwest region; and the third one highlights its

evolution from the beginning of its creation to its internationalization. Thus, aspects such as the network's expansion, the consolidation of research activities, and the forecasts of results to be achieved in this new phase of its development are analyzed.

The analysis presented in this article aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the development of distance education research in the Midwest region and to explore the internationalization process of the *Rede Pesquisa EaD*, in order to contribute to the effectiveness of a socially referenced quality EaD. In addition, it is believed that the analysis presented in this text can also provide valuable insights for other distance education research networks, especially those in the early stages of development.

2 FROM THE FORMATION OF GEAD TO THE CONSOLIDATION OF THE REDE PESQUISA EAD

The analyzes showed that the concerns regarding the need for in-depth studies on distance education did not arise with the *Rede Pesquisa EaD* but originated with the creation of the Group of Studies and Research in Technologies and Distance Education (GEaD/CNPq/FE-UFG) in 2014. GEaD is recognized for its important role in the field of distance education in the context of the Federal University of Goiás (UFG), and its historical trajectory is guided by the commitment to promote studies and research on the improvement of educational practices and theories mediated by Digital Information and Communication Technologies (TDICs) and on the theoretical and normative specificity of distance education (BATISTA; FONSECA, 2018).

GEaD aims to carry out analytical studies on Distance Education, with an emphasis on reflection on its concept, its forms of pedagogical organization, structure and management, and on public policies for this modality. According to Batista and Fonseca (2018), GEaD produces scientific knowledge and critical reflection on EaD through studies and research, contributing to the improvement of the quality of this educational modality through the elaboration of technical documents and the analysis of data on its expansion in Brazil. Also, according to the authors, the group plays an important role in the production and dissemination of knowledge about Distance Education, promoting its development and strengthening on a social basis.

From the projects and productions of the group, it appears that in the years following its creation, there was an expansion of activities, prioritizing actions aimed at public Distance Education in the Midwest region. In addition, an EaD forum

was established in the region, and monthly meetings of analytical studies, research, and construction of a technical document on public policies of the modality were promoted, among other activities.

This expansion of activities is positive, as it demonstrates the growth and maturation of GEaD as a research group and its ability to contribute to the development of Distance Education in the Midwest region. The production of technical documents and theoretical studies on EaD public policies is particularly important to promote debate and critical reflection on the subject, as well as to support the decision-making of managers and public policymakers.

This capacity was essential for the development of GEaD's work, especially in 2020 and 2021, a period that required significant changes in its activities due to the coronavirus pandemic (Covid-19). In the words of Bach, Haynes and Smith (2007, p. 5, our translation), "intense periods of change are followed by brief periods of consolidation, which are followed by more intense changes". This meaning was intertwined with the reality experienced by GEaD, which in 2020 had to adapt to the new demands of emergency remote teaching with the Covid-19 pandemic and the adoption of measures to contain the spread of the new coronavirus, which was a major challenge for the group. However, GEaD proved to be able to face this situation, focusing its activities on the deepening and theoretical grounding of public policies related to distance education and TDICs, and on the reflection of teaching and learning processes with the use of digital technologies, providing support to basic and higher education institutions.

Based on this experience, the 2022 Group expanded its discussions to address the different nomenclatures and concepts that include EaD modalities, such as flexible, open, and hybrid education. Several questions about the application of technologies in education and their impact on the teaching and learning process were raised, considering that the deepening of theoretical discussions and reflections on the challenges and opportunities of EaD and the use of technologies in education is essential for the development of more effective and integrated strategies. According to Batista and Fonseca (2018), EaD plays a fundamental role in this process, contributing to the advancement of knowledge and the improvement of public policies in education. The studies carried out in 2022 resulted in the publication of an e-book by Alfredo Nasser Publisher, which allowed the dissemination and appreciation of the knowledge generated by the group.

The analysis of the projects and activities of GEaD allowed us to observe that this study group plays an important role in the field of Distance Education. In this sense, the proposal for the year 2023 could not be more timely: to study and reflect on the National Common Curriculum Base for Basic Education, especially on the notions of competence

and skills, and the resumption of social public policies aimed at Education and Distance Higher Education (LIMA, 2023).

This action illustrates that in a time of uncertainty and challenges, it is essential that education is at the center of discussions, especially in terms of public policy. The Covid-19 pandemic has raised several issues that must and should be addressed by Education, as it is one of the most affected sectors (OLIVEIRA, 2021). Therefore, the GEaD must be attentive to the changes and challenges of this scenario, and it tries to anticipate the new educational demands, especially in the field of EaD.

Given the most urgent needs in the field of education, it has been observed that there is an appreciation of scientific research and Education, at its different levels and modalities, as one of the great hopes for the future of Distance Education in Brazil. It is in this framework and in the context of GEaD that *Rede Pesquisa EaD* emerged in 2015, with the important role of contributing significantly to the provision of a socially referenced quality distance education that allows the creation of mechanisms for the construction of a more democratic society.

3 THE GENESIS OF *REDE PESQUISA EAD* IN THE MIDWEST REGION

Distance Education has been expanding in Brazil and has become an important alternative for democratizing access to education (FONSECA; LIMA; DINIZ, 2022). In this context, the *Rede Pesquisa EaD* of the Midwest Region has played a fundamental role in the production of knowledge and in the search for improving the quality of Distance Education.

In order to advance this writing, this article welcomes the concept of a research network as "a community [...] of people who are more connected to each other than they are to other groups [...]. Communities are defined by structural relationships, not necessarily by a specific shared characteristic" (CHRISTAKIS; FOWLER, 2010, p. 8, our translation).

Thus, to speak of a network is also to refer to a group of people who share common interests and work together on specific projects. The definition of community, on the other hand, according to Christakis and Fowler (2010), is somewhat broader. In their view, a community is a group of people who connect and interact with each other based on shared interests, values, beliefs, or goals. This connection can be established through different types of relationships, such as friendship, family, and professional ties, among others.

In the context of a research network, the connection

between people is established through professional, theoretical, epistemological, and interest ties in specific areas of study. What characterizes this network is precisely the intensity and frequency of these connections, which ultimately form a community of researchers structured by the relationships among its members, and not necessarily by a specific common characteristic, such as an academic background or a field of study.

For this reason, it is common for researchers from different fields and backgrounds to collaborate on research projects, as what unites them is their interest in a particular topic or research problem (CHRISTAKIS; FOWLER, 2010). This intense and frequent connection ends up forming a community structured around the relationships between its members. In this sense, the definition of network and community are intertwined in the web of the constitution of the concept of research network.

Regarding the trajectory of *Rede Pesquisa EaD* in the Midwest region, the documentary research on projects and activity reports that began in 2015 showed interest in the institutionalization of distance higher education in federal universities in the Midwest region, deepening its processes, organization, and practices (LIMA, 2018). The main objective of this study was to characterize, analyze and compare the extent to which the process of implementation and institutionalization of the EaD modality is occurring in federal institutions in the Midwest region, identifying the trajectories, actions, and projects related to the organization and procedures in the scope of distance education, as noted by Lima *et al.* (2018).

The authors emphasize that this version of the research was funded by the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq), through CNPq/MCTI Call No. 25/2015 Human, Social and Applied Social Sciences (Process No. 443725/2015-2). The research took place between 2015 and 2018, and brought together the following federal institutions of higher education (IFES) in the Midwest region: Federal University of Goiás (UFG), University of Brasília (UnB), Federal University of Mato Grosso (UFMT), Federal University of Mato Grosso do Sul (UFMS) and Federal University of Grande Dourados (UFGD).

This first study of the *Rede Pesquisa EaD* brought important results on the institutionalization of the modality in the Federal Institutes of Higher Education (IFES) of the Midwest region. However, according to the research, the IFES were still in the process of institutionalizing the modality and needed references to develop it. It was also found that the IFES carried out their projects and actions to meet external demands, such as public notices and public policies, and not on their initiative, and that they had not yet

incorporated the modality in their statutes and general regulations solidly and predictably.

Regarding the data on the offer of courses, it was observed that all IFES offered distance learning only through the Open University of Brazil (UAB), and with the lack of public calls, a decrease in the offer of courses was recorded between 2015 and 2018. Figure 1 shows the elements identified by the *Rede Pesquisa EaD* as drivers of studies.

Figure 1 - Elements of the *Rede Pesquisa EaD* study from 2015 to 2018



Source: Developed by the authors, based on Lima and Santos (2021).

This study of the *Rede Pesquisa EaD* showed that the modality was not institutionalized in the Midwest region. Thus, it highlighted the need to expand applied research to improve the pedagogical management of EaD and to stimulate the debate in IFES on the institutional identity and role of the modality. It also highlighted the importance of defining Distance Education as a Public Policy aimed at regulating, monitoring, and evaluating Distance Higher Education, articulated with the quality benchmarks for the field. These recommendations were important because EaD is a growing teaching modality in Brazil, and it is essential to guarantee its quality, regulation, and innovation to prevent it from becoming a precarious and devalued alternative to presential teaching.

It was also found that there is a need to understand the regulation, regulatory, and standardization of distance education to offer distance courses so that students can receive quality training. It was also found that such a study is fundamental to understanding how higher education has changed in the country, what challenges it faces, and how EaD could contribute to building a



less unequal and egalitarian society.

Thus, the *Rede Pesquisa EaD* decided to continue the research, expanding the partner institutions and developing what it called "Elements for the Constitution of a Quality Reference for the Offering of Innovative EaD", with an empirical focus on the reality of the Midwest region. This continuity of the research sought to strengthen the provision of the modality with quality and to contribute to the consolidation of distance education as a State policy aimed at the regulation, supervision, and evaluation of distance higher education.

In this regard, the *Rede Pesquisa Ead* developed, in the period 2019/2021, the research entitled "Distance Education Expansion Policies in Brazil: Regulation, Quality, and Innovation in Question" (free translation), which aimed to analyze the concepts, dimensions, and mechanisms of quality and innovation present in the supply and expansion of distance education in Brazil. The analysis considered the changes in the trajectory, regulation, presence, and strategies of actors who work and deal with the modality.

As situated, the first version of the *Rede Pesquisa EaD* was constituted by the IFES of the Midwest Region: UFG, UnB, UFMT, UFMS, and UFGD. In the second edition, the need to expand the number of partner institutions was recognized, so the State University of Goiás (UEG), the Federal Institute of Goiás (IF Goiano), the Federal Institute of Goiás (IFG), the Federal Institute of Brasília (IFB) and the following private non-profit universities were added: Don Bosco Catholic University of Mato Grosso do Sul (UCDB / MS) and the Pontifical Catholic University of Goiás (PUC Goiás). The integration of these institutions was crucial for the construction of elements for the constitution of a quality reference for the offer of innovative EaD (LIMA; SANTOS, 2021).

Within this context, the 2019/2021 version of the *Rede Pesquisa EaD* was prepared taking into account the principle of education as a public good, a social right, and a duty of the State. It is important to emphasize that this principle rejects both the idea that education is a commodity, and the mercantilist processes that have been gaining strength in recent decades (DIAS SOBRINHO, 2010).

In this conceptual and theoretical line, the quality of education is understood in a social and polysemic way, in which the conception of the world, society, and education determine the elements to qualify, evaluate and define the desirable characteristics of an educational process of social quality. This second edition of the *Rede Pesquisa EaD* is based on a comprehensive understanding of quality, taking into account the intra and extra-educational dimensions, the different actors, the different pedagogical dynamics, the different extra-



educational factors, and the commitments of the State.

Another movement addressed in this second survey of the *Rede Pesquisa EaD* was innovation in education. In this particular case, innovation is seen as a multidimensional process that is related to the political, social, and economic changes that occur in societies. Therefore, as Oliveira and Courela (2013) state, as a process that can transform the space in which it occurs, using new materials, processes, technologies, strategies and activities, and changing the beliefs of those involved.

It should be noted that, according to Lima and Alonso (2021, p. 52, our translation), "the movement mentioned here, therefore, has to do with views and places that are involved in a definition that is in no way detached from a theoretically referenced context". The authors' statement leads to the understanding that the movement is based on a specific theoretical perspective that considers the conditions and factors that influence Distance Education, and therefore it cannot be understood outside this context. Thus, it is understood that it is important to consider the theoretical point of view when discussing quality and innovation in distance education to obtain a more complete and accurate understanding of the modality.

In this regard, important theoretical contributions to this edition of *Rede Pesquisa EaD* are the studies by Alonso (2009), Dourado (2011), Lima (2014) and Fonseca (2020), which point out several factors that compromise the quality of distance learning courses. Among them, we highlight that:

- the spread of EaD in higher education has created an educational marketplace;
- the expansion of the modality was based on a quantitative and privatistic perspective;
- the courses were materialized without the minimum conditions of the specific policies and proposals for the modality;
- the definition of a single model of EaD for Brazil seems to be the trend.;
- the promotion of courses in public IES is done through individual calls for proposals;
- the normative flexibilization provided the offer of EaD in the country, based on instrumental-merco-economic bases.

This version of the research showed that the *Rede Pesquisa EaD* in the Midwest seeks to study Distance Education not from an accreditation perspective, but from a quality and innovation perspective, based on a critical-social referenced approach. It was also highlighted that to analyze the quality of EaD it is necessary to: understand its concept and its institutionalization needs; develop specific public policies; use technologies in a critical and emancipatory way; and work collaboratively and with social relevance.

In this context, it is worth mentioning Fonseca, Lima and Diniz (2022), who highlight the expansion of enrollments in distance higher education in the private sector in Brazil and the specificity of the Midwest region. This point highlights not only the need to offer EaD courses in public institutions, but also the need for them to be clear about which EaD they want to develop and, above all, to have stable and durable public policies that prioritize public action over private action.

The research in question sought to generate quality and innovation indicators from a theoretical perspective and from the data collected through the Delphi¹ technique, which demonstrated its relevance as a methodology for constructing dimensions and quality indicators for EaD. In order to ensure the effectiveness of the technique, the *Rede Pesquisa EaD* offered a training course to all members of the research team before the planning and execution of the research.

Regarding the results obtained with the Delphi technique, Lima and Santos (2021) pointed out that most of the interviewees of the research questionnaires, composed of EaD managers and researchers from the Midwest region and participating institutions, were unclear about what constitutes the quality of EaD. The authors found that the participants related the technique to the micro aspects instead of the meso and macro aspects and that there was no agreement on the elements that should constitute a quality EaD, a fact that, for them, indicates that this knowledge is still under construction.

In this regard, Lima and Alonso (2021, p. 52, our translation) make the following considerations: "The research results contribute to the debate on the quality and innovation of the EaD, from a local perspective of the Midwest Region, lacking the extension of discussions or new research that includes the other regions of Brazil..

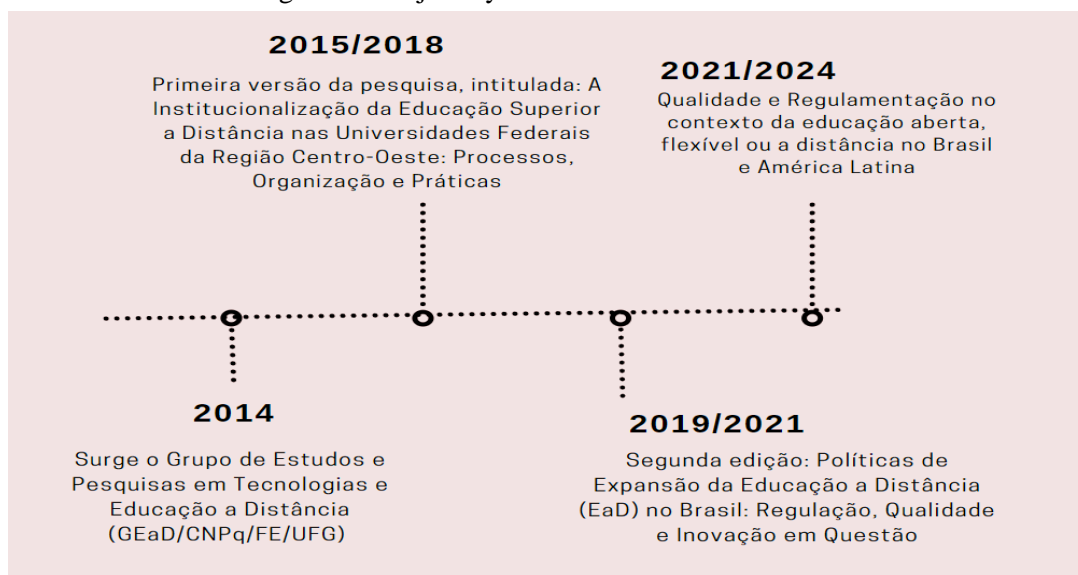
Thus, the research results provide valuable information on how EaD is perceived and practiced in the Midwest region, but according to Lima and Alonso (2021), they cannot be generalized to the whole of Brazil because each region has its particularities in terms of access to technology, availability of infrastructure, and culture and socioeconomic characteristics in the way EaD is integrated and perceived. These results led the authors to conclude that more research is needed in other regions of Brazil to have a broader understanding of the quality and innovation of EaD in the country. This will be the subject of the next network research, as presented in the following section.

¹ According to Linstone *et al.* (2002), the Delphi technique is a procedure used to organize group interaction, enabling a set of individuals to be treated as a collective entity, with the aim of addressing complex issues.

4 INTERNATIONALIZATION OF *REDE PESQUISA EAD*

This section reflects on the process by which the *Rede Pesquisa EaD* expanded from the Brazilian Midwest to its internationalization. As already mentioned, the network is composed of research groups and educational institutions that work together to promote the development of research and actions related to Distance Education. Figure 2 contributes to the visualization of the trajectory of the *Rede Pesquisa EaD* from 2018 to its current phase.

Figure 2 - Trajectory of the EaD Research Network



Source: Developed by the authors (2023).

On this path, the network has expanded its capacity and visibility, establishing partnerships with other institutions and participating in national and international events and forums on Distance Education. This internationalization process is important not only for the expansion of the network's activities but also for the exchange of knowledge and experience with other educational and research institutions around the world.

The *Rede Pesquisa EaD* started the 2021/2024 edition based on important information that, however, needs to be further explored and expanded to be confirmed. As stated in the research project, the previous version had as its object of study the Midwest region and highlighted the need to expand the study to other regions and countries for comparative purposes.

The idea is to build on existing and new data, including national and international bibliographic surveys, data from participating institutions, and the Delphi

technique. A bibliographic survey carried out by the network's previous research showed that quality and innovation in distance higher education are not regulated in many countries, that there are different nomenclatures to deal with EaD, and that the term quality is polysemic and lacks depth in Distance Education. In addition, it was found that quality is not a prominent element in the official documents of institutions and that most respondents are not clear about what quality in distance education entails (LIMA *et al.*, 2021).

Through the documentary study, it was found that for the 2021/2024 edition, the *Rede Pesquisa EaD* has established a partnership with the Network University Association (Unirede)² to build the *Rede Pesquisa EaD* Brasil/Internacional, through a working group led by Professor Daniela da Costa Britto Pereira Lima (UFG) and coordinated by Professors Lilian Giotto Zaros de Medeiros (UFRN) and Maria Luísa Furlan Costa (UEM). This is a valuable opportunity for the advancement of knowledge in the field since it allows the exchange of information, ideas, and methodologies between researchers and national and international institutions.

As seen above, the first version of the Distance Education Research Network was consolidated with the partnership of the IFES of the Midwest region - UFG, UnB, UFMT, UFMS, and UFGD. The second edition had the partnership of public institutions and private non-profit institutes and universities: IF Goiano, IFG, IFB, UEG, UCDB/MS, and PUC Goiás. The current version of the research, according to Lima *et al.* (2021), expanded this partnership to several national and international institution.

In Brazil, the *Rede Pesquisa EaD* is formed by the following institutions in the North region: **Acre** - Federal Institute of Acre (IFAC) and Federal University of Acre (UFAC); **Amapá** - Federal Institute of Amapá (IFAP), Federal University of Amapá (UNIFAP) and State University of Amapá (UEAP); **Amazonas** - Federal Institute of Amazonas (IFAM), Federal University of Amazonas (UFAM) and State University of Amazonas (UEA); **Pará** - Federal Institute of Pará (IFPA), Federal Rural University of Pará (UFRPA), Federal University of Pará (UFPA), Federal University of the West of Pará (UFOPA), Federal University of the South and Southeast of Pará (UNIFESSPA) and State University of Pará (UEPA); **Rondônia** - Instituto Federal de Rondônia (IFRO) and Universidade Federal de Rondônia (UNIR); **Roraima** - Instituto Federal de Roraima (IFRR), Universidade Federal de Roraima (UFRR) and Universidade Estadual de Roraima (UERR); **Tocantins** - Centro Universitário (UNIRG), State University of Tocantins (Unitins), Federal

² The University Network Association (UniRede) is a non-profit civil entity without political or religious connotations, with headquarters and jurisdiction in Brasília, DF. Available at: https://www.aunirede.org.br/portal/Arquivos/QuemSomos/Regimento/Regimento_UniRede.pdf/

Institute of Tocantins (IFTO) and Federal University of Tocantins (UFTO) (LIMA *et al.* , 2021).

In the Northeast region, the *Rede Pesquisa EaD* has established partnerships with educational institutions in the following states: **Alagoas** - Federal Institute of Alagoas (IFAL) and Federal University of Alagoas (UFAL); **Bahia** - Federal Institute of Bahia (IFBA), State University of Bahia (UESB), State University of Santa Cruz (UESC), Federal University of Bahia (UFBA), Federal University of Recôncavo da Bahia (UFRB), State University of Bahia (UNEB) and Federal University of Vale do São Francisco (UNIVASF); **Ceará** - Federal Institute of Ceará (IFCE), State University of Ceará (UECE), Federal University of Ceará (UFC), State University of Ceará / Distance Education Center (UVA-CE) and University of International Integration of Afro-Brazilian Lusophony (UNILAB); **Maranhão** - Federal Institute of Maranhão (IFMA), State University of Maranhão (UEMA) and Federal University of Maranhão (UFMA); **Paraíba** - Federal Institute of Paraíba (IFPB); **Pernambuco** - Federal Institute of Pernambuco (IFPE), Federal University of Pernambuco (UFPE), Federal Rural University of Pernambuco (UFRPE) and University of Pernambuco (UPE); **Piauí** - Federal Institute of Piauí (IFPI), Federal University of Piauí (UFPI) and State University of Piauí (UESPI); **Rio Grande do Norte** - Federal Institute of Rio Grande do Norte (IFRN), State University of Rio Grande do Norte (UERN), Federal Rural University of Semi-Arid (UFERSA) and Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte (UFRN) (LIMA *et al.* , 2021).

In the Midwest region, the *Rede Pesquisa EaD* aggregated institutions from the following states: **Mato Grosso** - State University of Mato Grosso (UNEMAT), Federal University of Mato Grosso (UFMT) and Federal Institute of Mato Grosso (IFMT); **Mato Grosso do Sul** - State University of Mato Grosso do Sul (UEMS), Federal University of Grande Dourados (UFGD) and Federal University of Mato Grosso do Sul (UFMS); **Distrito Federal** - University of Brasília (UnB) and Federal Institute of Brasília (IFB); **Goiás** - Federal Institute of Goiás (IFG), Federal Institute of Goiás (IF Goiano), Federal University of Goiás (UFG) and State University of Goiás (UEG) (LIMA *et al.* , 2021).

From the Southeast region, the following institutions are part of the network: **Minas Gerais** - Federal Institute North of Minas Gerais (IFNMG), Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG), Federal University of Alfenas (UNIFAL), State University of Montes Claros (UNIMONTES), State University of Minas Gerais (UEMG), Federal University of São João Del-Rei (UFSJ), Federal University of Lavras (UFLA), Federal University of Uberlândia (UFU), Federal University of Itajubá (UNIFEI), Federal University of Ouro Preto (UFOP), Federal University of the Jequitinhonha and Mucuri Valleys (UFVJM),

Federal University of Juiz de Fora (UFJF) and Federal Institute of the Triângulo Mineiro (IFTM); **Rio de Janeiro** - State University of Norte Fluminense (UENF), Federal Fluminense University (UFF), Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ), Federal Rural University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRRJ) and Federal University of the State of Rio de Janeiro (UNIRIO); **São Paulo** - Federal Institute of Education, Science and Technology of São Paulo (IFSP), Federal University of ABC (UFABC), Federal University of São Carlos (UFSCAR) and Federal University of São Paulo (Unifesp) (LIMA *et al.*, 2021).

From the South Region, the EaD Network consists of institutions in **Paraná**: State University of Londrina (UEL); State University of Maringá (UEM); State University of Norte do Paraná (UENP); State University of Ponta Grossa (UEPG); Federal University of Paraná (UFPR); State University of the Center (UNICENTRO); State University of Western Paraná (UNIOESTE); **Rio Grande do Sul**: Federal University of Rio Grande - FURG; Federal Institute of Education, Science and Technology Sul-rio-grandense (IFSul); Federal University of Pelotas (UFPEL); Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS) Federal University of Santa Maria (UFSM); Federal University of Pampa - (UNIPAMPA); State University of Rio Grande do Sul (UERGS). **Santa Catarina**; Farroupilha Federal Institute (IFFar); Santa Catarina State University (UDESC) and the Federal Institute of Santa Catarina (IFSC) (LIMA *et al.*, 2021).

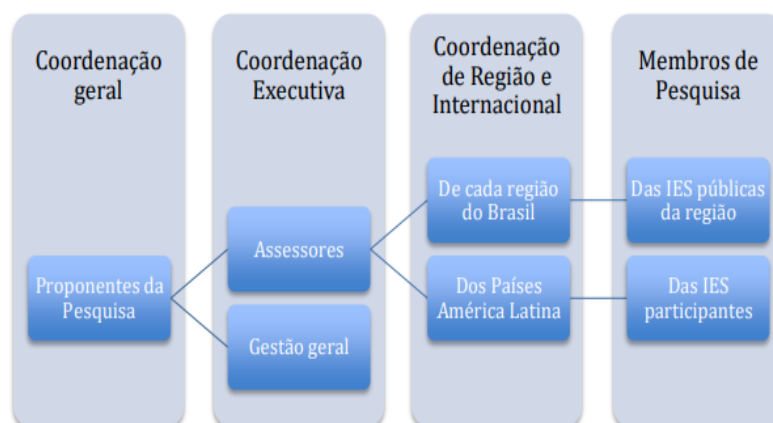
The international network was formed with the institutions mentioned above and institutions from **Mexico** - Universidad de Guadalajara and Universidad A de Nuevo Leon; **Mozambique** - Universidad de Pungue; and **Argentina** - Universidad Tecnológica Nacional (LIMA *et al.*, 2021). Partnerships were also established between Brazil, Argentina, Mozambique and Mexico to develop research on Distance Education (EaD) in a national and international context, enabling the understanding that, through the analysis of different realities, it is possible to acquire knowledge not only about the other, but also about ourselves, as Bereday (1972) points out.

The partnership between Brazilian institutions and those of the countries mentioned above has the potential to contribute significantly to the research objective, as it will provide the opportunity to study EaD in different cultural, economic, and political contexts. This will allow the identification of best practices, challenges, and opportunities, taking into account the specificities, peculiarities, and also the regulation of EaD in each Brazilian region or country involved.

The current edition of the research, given the greater number of institutions involved, makes the work and organization of activities more complex. To minimize this complexity, three coordinations have been created: 1) the General

Coordination, responsible for the general management of the project, the monitoring of the activities, the convening and holding of meetings, and the legal representation before the funding institutions; 2) the Regional Coordination and the International Coordination, responsible for the execution of the research in each Brazilian region and in the countries participating in it, and for assisting the General Coordination. It is also responsible for managing the participation of the executing researchers, to which are attached the Coordination Advisors, responsible for advising the Coordinations of the Regions and the International Area; 3) the Executive Coordination, responsible for the technical coordination of the research project, the control of social networks, the virtual environment and documentation, the issuance of official documents and advising other Coordinations. Figure 3 provides a better understanding of the constitution of this network.

Figure 3 - Participants/members of the research - Constitution of the EaD Network



Source: Lima *et al.* (2021, p. 16).

The methodology adopted in this last edition of the *Rede Pesquisa EaD* was based on the cycle of Minayo (1994), which was used in three phases: exploratory, data collection, and material processing. In the exploratory phase, the bibliographic and documentary research on the topic was carried out, as well as the theoretical construction of the work. In the data collection phase, the Delphi technique was used to obtain the consensus of experts on possible dimensions and indicators that could constitute the Quality Reference for Distance Education in Brazil and in the other countries involved in the research (LIMA *et al.*, 2021).

The last phase, data analysis and interpretation, according to Minayo's (1994) method, is essential to understand the underlying content of the research. The systematic organization of the data is done to derive the research problem, while the interpretation aims to reveal broader meanings

concerning other established knowledge. According to Lima et al. (2021), the analysis and treatment of the data can include convergent and divergent results collected through the comparative analysis between legislation, normative documents, and the Delphi technique, from the perspective of the theoretical framework. Understanding, articulating, contrasting, and organizing the data allow the connection between the theory and the observed information.

It should be emphasized that the conduct of research projects is fundamental to the advancement of knowledge in several fields. In addition to generating new knowledge, projects can also contribute to the production of new products and results that can be used by society. In the case of the current research, according to Lima *et al.* (2021), the execution schedule provides for the delivery of products during each year of its execution, that is, from 2021 to 2024. Among the products, the following stand out: the Distance Education Seminar, which is already in its fourth edition; the coordination of a thematic dossier in a scientific journal in the area; the publication of two books - organized with articles by members of the research - and the partial and final results, these in scientific journals in the area, both national and international.

In addition, Lima *et al.* (2021) point out that the members of the research will also participate in expressive events in the field of Education, presenting oral communications and publishing their results. It is also planned to hold thematic seminars in the postgraduate programs in Education of the higher education institutions participating in this last edition of the research, which will allow the dissemination of the results of the study and the exchange of experiences between researchers and students. The main outcome is expected to be the production of quality indicators for the provision of distance learning courses.

It is therefore undeniable that this edition of *Rede Pesquisa EaD* has contributed significantly to the advancement of knowledge in Distance Education and its offer of socially referenced quality. The various products and results obtained during its editions, in addition to the participation of researchers in events and the publication of articles in prestigious journals, demonstrate the relevance and importance of the new edition of Distance Education research.

5 CONSIDERATIONS

In conclusion, this article emphasizes the relevance of research in Distance Education (EaD) and how the *Rede Pesquisa EaD* of the Faculty of Education of the Federal University of Goiás

(FE/UFG) has evolved. The qualitative, exploratory, and descriptive methodology used allowed an in-depth analysis of the objectives, activities, and partnerships established by the network.

The results obtained show that the *Rede Pesquisa EaD* has made significant progress since its creation, achieving important goals such as its internationalization. The analysis of the current and previous versions, as well as the official documents of the network, shows the strategies adopted to overcome the challenges and achieve the proposed objectives.

In this sense, the article presents a broad view of the evolution of the *Rede Pesquisa EaD*, highlighting its importance in the production of knowledge and its contribution to the advancement of the area. In addition, this study can serve as a reference for other research networks in the EaD, which can be inspired by the strategies adopted by the *Rede Pesquisa EaD* of FE/UFG to overcome obstacles and achieve their goals. It should be noted that this text does not exhaust the topic, but rather opens new possibilities for discussions on the relevance of research networks for the promotion of science in the country.

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