● Original article

STUDENT PERMANENCE IN DISTANCE EDUCATION: A CHALLENGE IN HEALTH MANAGERS' TRAINING*

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ABSTRACT: Case study with a qualitative approach, aiming to analyze students' permanence in a specialization course in Health Management in the distance education modality, offered at a higher education institution. The participants were 59 students affiliated with in-class support hubs in Minas Gerais and São Paulo, who answered the semistructured interview and an online questionnaire in August 2014. Thematic-Categorical Content Analysis and simple descriptive statistics were used. As the theoretical framework, the final model to analyze students' permanence in distance education courses was used. It was verified that family support, work, interaction with the tutor and technological skills favored the permanence. An appropriate academic structure, associated with the credibility of the proponent institution and the student's commitment catalyzed the permanence. It is concluded that health managers' training in distance education requires that the multiple factors that influence this permanence be taken into account.
DESCRIPTORS: Information Technology; Education, Distance; Health Management; Health human resource training; Education, continuing.

PERMANÊNCIA DE ALUNOS NA MODALIDADE A DISTÂNCIA: DESAFIO NA FORMAÇÃO DE GESTORES EM SAÚDE

RESUMO: Estudo de caso com abordagem qualitativa, que buscou analisar a permanência de alunos em um curso de especialização de Gestão em Saúde na modalidade a distância, em uma Instituição de Ensino Superior. Participaram 59 alunos, vinculados a polos de apoio presencial em Minas Gerais e São Paulo, que responderam a entrevista semiestruturada e um questionário on-line, em agosto de 2014. Utilizou-se a Análise de Conteúdo Temático-Categorial e estatística descritiva simples. Como referencial teórico, utilizou-se o Modelo final para análise da permanência de alunos em cursos na modalidade a distância. Verificou-se que apoio familiar, trabalho, interação com a tutoria e habilidade com os recursos tecnológicos favoreceram a permanência. Uma estrutura acadêmica adequada, associada à credibilidade da instituição proponente e o compromisso do aluno, catalisaram a permanência. Conclui-se que a formação de gestores em saúde, por meio da modalidade a distância, exige considerar os múltiplos fatores que influenciam a permanência.
DESCRITORES: Tecnologia da Informação; Educação à Distância; Gestão em Saúde; Formação profissional em saúde; Educação continuada.

PERMANENCIA DE ALUMNOS EN LA MODALIDAD A DISTANCIA: RETO EN LA FORMACIÓN DE GESTORES EN SALUD

RESUMEN: Estudio de caso con aproximación cualitativa, que buscó analizar la permanencia de alumnos en un curso de especialización de Gestión en Salud en la modalidad a distancia en una Institución de Educación Superior. Participaron 59 alumnos, vinculados a polos de apoyo presencial en Minas Gerais y São Paulo, que contestaron una entrevista semiestructurada y un cuestionario en línea en agosto del 2014. Fue utilizado el análisis de Contenido Temático-Categorial y estadística descriptiva simple. Como referencial teórico, fue utilizado el Modelo final para análisis de la permanencia de alumnos en cursos a distancia. Se verificó que apoyo familiar, trabajo, interacción con la tutoría y habilidad con los recursos tecnológicos favorecieron la permanencia. Una estructura académica adecuada, asociada a la credibilidad de la institución proponente y el compromiso del alumno, catalizaron la permanencia. Se concluye que la formación de gestores en salud en la modalidad a distancia exige considerar los múltiples factores que influyen en la permanencia.
DESCRIPTORES: Tecnología de la Información; Educación a Distancia; Gestión en Salud; Capacitación de recursos humanos en salud; Educación continua.

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● INTRODUCTION

In view of the need for qualified public managers, since 2009, the Ministry of Education, through the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES) and the System *Universidade Aberta do Brasil* (UAB), has developed the National Training Program in Public Management (PNAP). This comprises the Bachelor program in Public Management, specialization in Public Management, specialization in Municipal Public Management and Specialization in Health Management [1-2].

It is highlighted that all courses affiliated with the PNAP are offered free of charge in the Distance Education (DE) modality, aiming to democratize the access to education and reducing the geographic barriers [1]. It is known that globalization has contributed to the growth and credibility of DE, being a teaching alternative that uses technologies to intermediate the continuing learning process [3].

Despite the evolution of DE in Brazil, it was verified that dropout represented one of the main problems in this modality and, in the PNAP, this problem is also present [4-5]. Recently, besides the drop-out, it is necessary to understand the students' permanence in their educational trajectory, whether in the in-class or distance education modality [6-7].

Permanence is the action in the opposite sense of dropout and leads to a degree. It is associated with the learning conditions established, through affectivity and knowledge construction, supported by interaction in virtual environments [8]. The survey of information about the remaining students' individual and situational characteristics can guide the construction of actions and teaching strategies appropriate to the profile and needs of the target audience, which can contribute to reduce the drop-out [7].

The need to understand the factors that influence the permanence is justified, with a view to proposing teaching strategies that cover motivating learning contexts [7]. Hence, the following question is raised: "How has students' permanence been influenced in a specialization course in Health Management in the distance education modality?".

● METHODS

A case study with a qualitative approach was undertaken. This approach is due to the need to understand a phenomenon that is linked to the subjectivity of the individual, his historicity and relations with the environment (9) . The use of the case study is justified because this methodological framework can capture contemporary and significant events in real life [10]. The analysis unit was the students' permanence in a distance-education specialization course in Health Management.

The scenario was a public Higher Education Institution (HEI) that offers the course in eight in-class support hubs, six of these being located in the state of Minas Gerais and two in the state of São Paulo. The course has been offered at this HEI since 2013. Students were included from the first class that concluded the course (passed all subjects and the Course Conclusion Monograph – CCM). Students who did not attend the defense of the CCM, who did not pass some subject or who had any pending subject that made it impossible for them to graduate were excluded. Based on the above criteria, among the 320 students enrolled in the course, 120 were considered as graduates.

On the day of the CCM defense, in 2014, at the in-class support hubs and after the final approval, the students who attended and who complied with the criteria were invited to participate. Thus, 59 of the 120 graduates from the first group accepted to participate in the research. After they had accepted, the students were taken to a room at the in-class support hub were semistructured interviews were held. Then, they were taken to the computer laboratory and completed an online questionnaire. The data were collected by eight different collaborators, properly trained, one at every support hub.

Both sources of evidence (interview and online questionnaire) were elaborated based on the "Final model for the analysis of student permanence in distance education courses" proposed by Silva [8:212]. Three of the dimensions in this model were used. In the first, "The graduate's profile", the following components are listed: Individual attributes, Contextual aspects, Work and training, Family context, Previous degree. The components of the second dimension, "Being in a network", are: Use of ICTs,

Teacher interaction and Student interaction. The final dimension, "Permanence conditions", contains the following components: personal commitment and institutional credibility [8].

These dimensions and their components guided the categorization of the results. Silva's [8] model can be divided in two: one in the distance education modality and the other in the in-class modality. Only the theoretical model was used though, which relates to distance education, as that is the context for the course assessed.

The data from the online questionnaire were treated using simple descriptive statistics. The interview data were analyzed using Thematic-Categorical Content Analysis [11], with the support of Atlas Ti software. Approval for the study was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee at Universidade Federal de São João del-Rei, under opinion 714.635, on 10/07/2014.

● RESULTS

The graduate's profile

As regards the individual characteristics, most of the students were female 40 (69%), with ages ranging between 27 and 56 years old (average 41.5 years), the predominant age range varying between 40 and 49 years 20 (35%). Concerning the marital status, 33 (57%) were married and, on average, 2.1 persons lived in the same house.

Most of the participants were public servants 53 (89%), while six (11%) were private employees. What the activity is concerned, 18 (30%) indicated working as health service managers/administrators, while 52 (88%) were active in the Unified Health System (SUS). As observed, 36 (61%) had one employment bond and 23 (39%) two or more bonds.

It was verified that 25 (42.3%) participants were nurses, followed by nine (15.2%) dentists and six (10.2%) pharmacists. Forty-four (75%) interviewees had obtained their most recent degree in a private network. It was identified that 34 (58%) of the interviewed professionals already held a postgraduate degree.

What the student's study context is concerned, it was verified that 35 (60%) had already taken distance-education courses. They worked while taking the course 57 (98%) and a small group reported participating in another simultaneous DE course 20 (34%). All participants affirmed that they knew how to use a discussion forum, e-mail and the Internet. They were familiar with the use of chats and chat rooms 56 (95%). All students studied at home and 33 (56%) also studied in the workplace. In addition, 93% of the students appointed the contribution of family members and colleagues from work to accomplish the course.

With regard to the participants' contextual aspects, it was identified that, despite the benefits of the course, it affects the organization of daily activities and their available time:

My life is very turbulent, so it is the lack of time [...]. (E1)

For you to take the course, you need to take time to study, and that ends up not happening due to your daily tasks [...]. (E28)

These barriers did not make it unfeasible for them to continue though. Some students highlighted their strategies to proceed with the course: self-discipline, organization and the search for support in the in-class hub.

I try to discipline myself, I try to do an hour load per day or per week [...]. (E37)

Get the daily routine right, reserve some time for tasks and forums [...]. (E48)

I did not stop visiting the hub for help. I was always there to solve the problems that emerged. (E40)

Personal circumstantial situations were appointed that made it difficult for the students to proceed with the course:

Because I got pregnant, my pregnancy was a bit complicated [...]. (E10)

I had many problems because I have children, I have twins, they're young [...]. (E32)

What the job is concerned, the students' activity area contributed to their permanence in the course. In addition, the possible application of the knowledge in the job was another stimulus.

80% of the activities in my job are management activities [...] so I wouldn't drop out midway [...]. (E2)

Most managers do not have an educational background, when you take the course, you have a greater basis [...]. (E5)

When you are able to envisage what you are doing to apply it in the job, it encourages you to finish [...]. (E18)

All problems we experience in our daily reality, we are able to see in the course, and to find solutions [...]. (E22)

As verified, the interaction, from the perspective of shared learning with the colleagues, strengthened the students' motivation to proceed with the course:

I took some course points to discuss with them and that contributed for me to participate in the forums, for me to execute the tasks [...]. (E29)

As they are exchanging some ideas, the people who work with me also participated actively in the course, together [...]. (E47)

The interviewees also recognized that some aspects of their job made it difficult for them to proceed with the course. They highlighted the burden of activities in their job and the different employment bonds.

We work in a management function, there's neither time to arrive nor to leave, it is difficult to conciliate the course activities with the job [...]. (E52)

There is another bond, so I always did the activities at night, on Sunday, that was the time I had [...]. (E3)

In addition, some discomfort of the work team towards the course participants was evidenced:

People feel somewhat insecure towards us [...] as you are training for that function, you perform better [...]. (E5)

Ah, they envy me [...] all of them would like to take my place [...]. (E28)

The family context was appointed as a motivator of the students' permanence and some relatives were acknowledged for their contribution to the direct development of the course activities.

I often thought of giving up, I got discouraged, but then mainly my wife supported me a lot, and I'm graduating [...]. (E12)

I have a sister, she always helped me with the tasks [...]. (E34)

The fact that the relatives also study and understand the student's absence from the family context was important to encourage the permanence.

We all study at home, the children study, I study and my husband studies [...] one serves as the other's accomplice. (E2)

They sometimes wanted to travel, go out, I said no, because I'm studying [...]. (E3)

During the weekend I could be visiting my family and I didn't and my family understood that [...]. (E29)

Being in a network

What the use of information technologies in health is concerned, some interviewees appointed that

the use of the virtual platform and e-mail made it easier for them to take the course.

I think that the easy handling of the platform was a facilitator [...]. (E24)

The strategy I used a lot was e-mail [...]. (E8)

Some students acknowledged difficulties to use computers. In addition, Internet access was mentioned as a difficult, mainly when related to the connectivity:

I don't know how to properly use the computer [...]. (E38)

The Internet here, being a small city, leaves much to be desired, because everything has to be done on the Internet [...]. (E11)

Concerning the interaction between teachers and students, some interviewees felt discouraged by the teacher's physical absence, felt the need for physical contact, face-to- face meeting, interaction and also highlighted the lack of feedback to teachers and tutors' questions.

I think that, for being a distance course, we end up missing the teachers [...]. (E36)

I answered quickly and I didn't get feedback in the same way [...]. (E8)

I missed this contact, with colleagues [...] I miss meeting [...] to quickly discuss what was studied in the mean time, and we are not always able to clarify [...]. (E16)

The tutor was acknowledged as a promoter to proceed with the course and also as a guide for the applicability of the knowledge in practice:

The tutor has always encouraged me, and that makes us continue participating in the course [...]. (E33)

The tutor helped me a lot, showed that I could use management situations to include in the consortium, so I managed with the help of the tutor [...]. (E15)

What the interaction among the students is concerned, the use of the discussion forum stood out as an enhancer of content exchange, shared learning and approximation among the participants, which strengthened the permanence.

The forum, it obliged us to raise questions, you see? To search [...] the other colleagues said on the forum, posted [...] it offers you several enlargements [...]. (E34)

I liked the part between the thematic forum and the discussion forum [...] it's a distance course, but at the same time you end up having contact with everyone [...]. (E42)

Conditions to proceed with the course

About the personal commitment, we found some characteristics inherent in the student's personality as driving forces for them to proceed with the course: their determination, the desire to gain knowledge and the fact that they liked to work in health management.

I do not usually give up halfway, when I start, I dedicate myself to reach the end [...]. (E2)

It is the same idea as when I wanted to start the course, improve my knowledge [...] so I wanted to go all the way [...]. (E45)

The fact that I like this health management area made it much easier for me to graduate [...]. (E24)

What the institutional credibility is concerned, some peculiar course characteristics were appointed as motivators of the students' permanence: the fact that the course is offered free-of- charge, the fact that it is offered in the distance education modality, the flexible times and places to study.

I'm here only because the course is for free [...]. (E12)

The ease to study at home has motivated me a lot, much better [...]. (E27)

The flexibility that we can set our own time [...]. (E48)

If the class were face-to- face I couldn't take part [...]. (E11)

The credibility of the course and the fact that it is offered at a public university were also recognized as important for the permanence. In addition, the competition to enter the course is seen as a stimulator to proceed with the course.

Over time, I saw the seriousness of the course [...] the credibility of the course was what encouraged me most to stay and finish [...]. (E10)

A renowned faculty, a federal faculty on my academic curriculum, that is excellent for me [...]. (E34)

I thought it was an excellent opportunity because [...] here is Santa Izabel, the competition to take the course is very strong [...]. (E42)

The easy contact with the coordination, organization, the coordinator's understanding of the problems the student experiences and his readiness to respond to the demands were highlighted.

The easy access to the coordination to get answers quickly. There was no problem [...]. (E30)

Understanding by the coordination of my personal problems [...]. (E8)

I think they are extremely organized, everything that was planned was concluded in time, and they always kept us informed of all activities that would take place [...]. (E10)

Despite the need for improvements, the course didactics and material were also recalled as drivers to proceed with the course.

I also liked the course didactics a lot, that made me continue [...]. (E3)

The didactic material helped me a lot, it encouraged me [...]. (E2)

I missed printed material to study [...] it is better when you receive the handout, I believe there is greater involvement [...]. (E15)

The course content was also acknowledged as a motivator to proceed.

As I got to know the course contents, I got interested, that's where I continued until graduation [...]. (E11)

When we saw the course content, the subjects, we saw that it was interesting to keep up our efforts [...]. (E33)

The flexibility in complying with the academic activities made it easy to conclude the course.

I didn't pass in the first phase, so I was unable to reach 60%, I had a second chance to graduate, so that made it easier for us [...]. (E10)

When I was unable to hand in my work, there was always a new date [...], because I would be unable to graduate otherwise [...]. (E10)

● DISCUSSION

The students predominantly recognized the family as an important source of support for developing the course. Students and families are interrelated, mutually help and influence one another, as that is the context they are inserted in, and which also takes form in the course they are developing, even in the distance education modality. These findings reinforce the observation that students seeking distance education are mostly adults and parents, instead of sons/daughters [8]. Similar results were found in the profile of the students in this study, mostly female, employed and married.

Hence, the students are responsible for the attributions that emerge from the family context, and which can influence their performance in the course [12-13]. Although elements related to the contextual

aspects favor their permanence, potential difficulties were also acknowledged. Nevertheless, the students pointed out strategies to overcome them: self-discipline, self-motivation and the search for support in the classroom.

Work and relationships, in this context, were also recognized as drivers of permanence. The motivations, the relationship between theory and practice, as well as the involvement of colleagues influenced the permanence. Work figures on the list of factors that have great (positive or negative) influence on the students' permanence in distance learning courses [8]. If the content learned in the course is applicable to the students' professional context, this can facilitate the conciliation between work and study, since it makes learning meaningful, applicable and solidary, contributing to the students' continuation [12,14].

Distance education proposes elements such as learning autonomy, network collaboration and the active posture of the learner [15]. These elements are fundamental to equip the management of health services with a view to overcoming challenges in this context: financing, changing care model, social control, decentralized management capacity, among others.

The debate about continuing education in health also reinforces this need to qualify the manager in a collaborative, networked and critically-reflective perspective. It is emphasized that the problems that emerge from the work guide the educational experiences and, therefore, collaborate towards the involvement of several actors [8,15-16].

It was verified that the possibilities of interactions between student / tutor / teacher influenced the decision to proceed with the course. The tutor was recognized as an important actor of mediation and encouragement. The need for (dependence on) the physical presence of the teacher and of the face-to- face interaction among the students was also appointed.

Thus, regarding the role of the tutors, their presence was manifested in the virtual context, and this was important for the students' permanence. On the other hand, this did not always take favorable forms. The presence in the virtual context generates the feeling of belonging to a group and is a necessary element to enhance the permanence [8,13].

In this process, the preservation of permanent communication access with the teachers/tutors permits the feedback of the teaching-learning process, as the activities are carried out [17], making it essential for the permanence in the course. Dialogue is the primordial premise for the development of critical awareness, built on the relationship among people [18].

In the virtual environment, the tutor needs to maintain an effective dialogue with the students, providing mutual interest, but also preserving the line of affection that makes them a comprehensive part of the process [17-18]. This translates into the development of cultural identity related to a particular group or community and their relationships (connections), which are established in this collaborative space [8], directly influencing the adherence and permanence of this participant throughout the course.

The skills with information technologies were manifested in the participants' interviews as a factor of influence in the permanence. The forum emerged as a technological tool of the virtual environment, permitting socialization and collaborative learning in a network perspective (exchanges, approximations, dialogues). It is important to emphasize that tutors play an important role in the development of technical skills in the use of the virtual environment, always considering the challenges of online learning [19].

As for the conditions to proceed with the course, there are important situations that are directly related to the student, the structure and the management of the course. These findings are in line with the fact that the students who continue encounter, at the HEI, the interest, motivations and favorable conditions to develop their activities [8]. It is important, however, to explicitly state the pedagogical conceptions of the course, provide the adequate infrastructure for its operation and structure its management, aiming to guarantee an appropriate trajectory to the students in the teaching-learning process [14].

The triad of personal commitment, academic integration and institutional credibility needs to be enhanced in the course, thus promoting the student's favorable conditions to proceed in distance

education [1,8].

As limitations in this study, we acknowledge its generalizability, being a case study with a context and particularities. We also recognize the difficulty in recruiting the students who remained in the course to participate in the study.

● CONCLUSION

As noticed, there are several factors that influence the permanence of the students in distance education. These factors range from the personal convictions and interests of the student to the political-pedagogical organization of the course and the institution that offers it. The fact that the students are immersed in a collaborative and supportive network can raise barriers to the development of their learning, but also enhances its further qualification and applicability in professional practices.

These findings represent contributions because they elucidate aspects that should be considered in the elaboration and evaluation process of distance education courses in health. In addition, they contribute to guide other studies that further reveal the theme of permanence.

Considering the continued offer of the specialization course in Health Management, through the PNAP, research is also needed to evaluate tutors and teachers and analyze the pedagogical practices, satisfaction and performance of the stakeholders, as well as the impacts on health service management.

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