RESEARCH ARTICLE

EXPLORING THE IMPORTANCE OF TUTORING IN DISTANCE EDUCATION (DE): A CASE STUDY AT THE FICTITIOUS SOLARES UNIVERSITY

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Distance education (DE) has undergone significant evolution in recent decades, largely propelled by advancements in information and communication technologies (ICT). Playing a vital role in DE is e-tutoring, serving as a mediator between teaching and learning, fostering autonomy and collaboration. This article aims to investigate the origins of DE tutoring, tracing its evolution and examining its current importance in educational contexts. In the 19th century, correspondence courses marked the early stages of DE, with tutors and students exchanging letters for interaction. In the early 20th century, institutions like the University of London and the Open University in the United Kingdom pioneered formalized DE programs supported by tutorial systems. The period between the 1980s and 1990s witnessed the emergence of digital DE platforms, driven by the rise of computers and the internet, enabling more immediate interaction between tutors and students.

I. INTRODUCTION

Distance Education (DE) is one of the major milestones in the evolution of education in recent decades, driven by the continuous growth of ICT – information and communication technologies. This evolution has not only facilitated access to education in various contexts, but also brought significant changes to our learning methods and teaching techniques.

These developments gave rise to the pedagogy of distance education, an indispensable element positioned between the teacher and the student: responsible for guiding educational activities while mediating teaching and promoting autonomous and collaborative learning.

This article aims to explore the historical origins and development of distance education, which plays an increasingly significant role in today's educational contexts. The evolution began in the 19th century with what became known as Correspondence Teaching, or EaD, which involved sending teaching materials and receiving students' work by mail; later introduced correspondence tutorial support. This method allowed students from different regions to have access to education, even though they were far from educational institutions.

Only at the beginning of the 20th century, with significant milestones such as the University of London and the Open University established in the United Kingdom, did formalized distance education programs with structured tutorial support emerge.

The University of London, for example, was a pioneer in offering exams to students studying at home. The UK Open

University, created in 1969, revolutionized the model by using a combination of radio, television and printed materials to reach its students. These institutions demonstrated that distance education could be organized in a more formal and effective way, increasing its credibility and acceptance.

Despite these notable precursors, each subsequent model has failed to address all of the shortcomings identified in its predecessors; Thus, the history of distance education can be seen as a continuous process of innovation that aims to find better ways to facilitate distance learning.

The digital age had a significant impact in the 1980s and 1990s, along with the rise of computers and the Internet as popular items; is mainly responsible for the birth of a new generation of digital distance education platforms.

This advanced technology ensured better real-time communication between teachers and students – thus broadening the horizons of joint learning and cooperation. The introduction of emails, discussion forums, videoconferences and learning management platforms transformed distance learning, allowing for more immediate and effective interaction.

Furthermore, the internet has facilitated access to a wide range of educational resources, promoting a richer and more diverse learning environment. Tools such as digital libraries and interactive platforms have made education more accessible and personalized.

Technological advances have also allowed the creation of more sophisticated monitoring and evaluation systems, which help to identify students' needs and offer more targeted support.

Therefore, the history of distance education is marked by constant evolution, driven by the desire to overcome the limitations of previous methods and take advantage of new technologies to improve the teaching and learning experience.

From correspondence teaching to modern digital platforms, distance learning continues to adapt and innovate to meet the educational demands of an increasingly interconnected and digitalized world.

Given the historical scenario presented, this article aims not only to analyze the evolution of tutoring in Distance Education, but also to highlight its growing importance nowadays, where the search for flexible and accessible teaching is increasingly urgent. By investigating the origins and development of tutoring in distance learning, we hope to contribute to a deeper understanding of contemporary educational dynamics and the refinement of more effective practices in distance learning.

II. METHODOLOGY

To investigate the origins and evolution of tutoring in distance learning and understand its importance today, we will adopt a methodological approach that combines historical research and contemporary analysis. Initially, we will carry out a broad bibliographical review, searching for historical sources on distance education, especially those related to tutoring. We will examine documents, books and articles that address the emergence and development of distance learning, highlighting the role of tutoring over time.

In addition, we will conduct interviews with experts in distance education and professionals who act as tutors in virtual learning environments. These interviews will allow us to learn about current distance tutoring practices, the challenges faced and the strategies adopted to promote effective and collaborative learning.

To enrich our investigation, we will analyze secondary data sources, statistical data and reports from educational institutions that offer Distance Education (EaD) programs. This analysis allows us to identify recent trends in online tutoring, including the use of digital platforms and virtual communication tools, as well as the impact of these trends on students' educational experiences.

We also use direct and indirect observation of participants and non-participants as research techniques for bibliographic and documentary consultation, interviews, and life experiences.

Furthermore, we will carry out a case study in an institution that offers distance learning courses, focusing on the implementation and effectiveness of tutoring strategies. This study will allow for a more in-depth analysis of how online tutoring is applied in practice and how it contributes to students' academic success.

By combining different research methods, we aim to gain a comprehensive understanding of distance tutoring, from its historical roots to its importance today. We hope that the results of this study will provide valuable information for teachers, educational institutions and policymakers, contributing to the continuous improvement of distance education.

III DE TUTORING: CRUCIAL ASPECTS IN THE EVOLUTION OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

The evolution of distance education (DL) is a complex phenomenon that involves a series of interconnected factors. Among these factors, technological advances play a fundamental role. From the 19th century to the present day, distance learning has benefited from the constant development of information and communication technologies (ICT), which have provided new forms of interaction between tutors and students. These technological innovations, ranging from correspondence courses to sophisticated digital distance learning platforms, have been crucial in facilitating more dynamic and collaborative learning [1].

In addition to technological advances, the popularization of distance learning is also intrinsically linked to profound transformations in the educational field. Distance tutoring, for example, appears as an essential element in this transformation process, promoting a student-centered approach that values autonomy and collaboration as fundamental pillars of the learning process [2].

The flexibility and accessibility provided by distance tutoring are crucial aspects for the democratization of education. Through online tutoring, students can access the support they need anywhere and at any time, overcoming geographic and temporal barriers that traditionally limit access to education [3].

Consider the existence of five generations, throughout the history of the distance learning modality [4], which are: study per correspondence; The streaming per radio It is television; The university open; The conference calls; computer and internet-based virtual classes.

Despite the obvious benefits, distance learning tutoring faces a series of challenges, ranging from ensuring the quality of teaching to the effectiveness of interaction between tutors and students in virtual environments.

Accessibility and technological infrastructure are fundamental, as many students still do not have adequate access to devices and stable Internet. Furthermore, maintaining student engagement and motivation without face-to-face interaction is a challenge, as is ensuring the quality of online teaching and assessments. The need for effective technical and pedagogical support for students and teachers, together with the promotion of interactivity and collaboration in a virtual environment, are also crucial.

The quality of content and teaching materials, the complexity of assessments and monitoring of learning, and ensuring inclusion and accessibility are also significant concerns.

Ensuring equity and inclusion, adapting distance learning for all students, and investing in the ongoing development of educators are essential steps to overcoming these challenges and offering effective and accessible distance education.

However, it is important to emphasize that these challenges are not just obstacles, but also opportunities for continuous innovation and improvement of tutoring practices [5]. Considering these different aspects, the importance of distance tutoring as a central element in the evolution of distance education and in the search for more inclusive, flexible and effective education becomes evident.

IV THE CASE "VIRTUAL UNIVERSITY SOLARES
IV.1 EMERGING PROBLEM: SHORTAGE OF DE TUTORS

The shortage of qualified distance learning teachers at the Virtual Solares University is a problem that directly affects the quality of education offered by the institution. Without a sufficient number of tutors able to meet the growing demand for distance learning courses, students may struggle to receive the support they need for their learning.

To illustrate the situation, recent data on distance tutoring at the Virtual University Solares are presented:

Table 1. Number of Students/Tutor.

Year	No. Students	No. Tutors	Students/Tutor
2020	5000	50	100
2021	6500	55	118
2022	8000	60	133
2023	-	-	-

Source: Authors, (2024).

Own preparation based on data collected from the University

The data in the table shows an increasing trend in the number of students enrolled at the Virtual Solares University over the years, indicating an increase significant of 5000 students in 2020 to 8000 in 2022.

At the same time, the number of tutors also increased from 50 to 60 in the same period. The average number of students per tutor increased from 100 in 2020 to 133 in 2022, suggesting an increase in the workload per tutor over the years.

With all this context, the significant growth of Distance Education (EaD) is redefining the contemporary educational scenario by offering accessible educational opportunities. This advance not only promotes socioeconomic development, increasing the qualifications of the workforce and reducing educational inequalities, but also facilitates social mobility through access to quality educational opportunities, resulting in better professional qualifications. Furthermore, it drives innovation in both educational technologies and teaching methodologies, highlighting the importance and need for investment and promotion in distance learning.

However, the challenge of the growth of Distance Education (EaD) must be accompanied by a proportional increase in the number of tutors, as the lack of balance can lead to several significant negative consequences:

- **Workload**: Existing tutors may be overwhelmed with large numbers of students, which may hamper their ability to provide *feedback* personalized and individualized support.

- **Decreased quality of interactivity**: With a limited number of tutors to serve a large student base, interaction between students and tutors may be reduced, negatively impacting the effectiveness of teaching.

- **Delays in resolving doubts**: With a shortage of tutors, students may face delays in getting answers to their academic doubts and queries, which may hamper their progress in the course.

- **Student dissatisfaction**: Lack of adequate tutor support can lead to student dissatisfaction with the educational experience offered by the university, resulting in decreased student retention and the institution's reputation.

V. DISCUSSION

The shortage of distance tutors at Virtual University Solares is not only an operational challenge, but a significant obstacle that directly affects the quality of education offered to students.

One of the main consequences of this shortage is the workload faced by existing tutors. With an insufficient number of professionals to serve a large student base, tutors can become overwhelmed, compromising their ability to provide personalized feedback and individualized support to students. This can result in a decrease in the quality of interactivity between students and tutors, which is essential for an effective learning environment.

The lack of qualified tutors can lead to delays in resolving students' doubts, which significantly impacts the quality of learning. In a dynamic and interactive learning environment, it is essential that students receive quick and efficient support for their academic questions and concerns. The shortage of tutors can make this process difficult, negatively impacting students' academic progress.

Qualified tutors play a crucial role in mediating knowledge and supporting students' skills development. They not only provide answers to queries, but also guide students on their learning journey, helping them understand complex concepts and apply knowledge in a practical way. The absence of adequate support can lead students to feel unmotivated and helpless, which can result in lower academic performance and even dropping out of school.

Furthermore, the lack of qualified tutors can directly affect the teaching methodology adopted by the institution. Pedagogical models that are based on continuous feedback and constant interaction between students and tutors become ineffective without a sufficient number of professionals prepared to offer this support.

Isso can lead to a less personalized and more standardized learning experience, where individual student needs are not met satisfactorily.

To mitigate these problems, it is essential that educational institutions invest in training and hiring qualified tutors. Continuing professional development programs for tutors can ensure they are up to date with best pedagogical practices and educational technologies. Additionally, hiring an adequate number of tutors is crucial to maintaining a healthy balance between student numbers and available support, ensuring that everyone receives the attention and support they need to thrive academically.

To resolve this issue, it is essential that Virtual University Solares adopts proactive measures, such as recruitment and retention strategies for qualified tutors, professional development

and training programs, and implementation of educational technologies that can help optimize the efficiency of tutorial support. Develop various techniques, frameworks and plugins to encourage interaction in discussion forums between student/tutor through the use of educational technology.

By comprehensively and strategically addressing the issue of the shortage of tutors in Distance Education (EaD), educational institutions not only mitigate operational challenges, but also recognize the fundamental importance of tutors for the quality of teaching. Tutors play a crucial role as facilitators of learning, providing individualized support, constructive feedback, and academic guidance to students. The active and engaged presence of tutors is essential to maintain student motivation, promote understanding of content and encourage active participation in educational activities.

Furthermore, well-trained and qualified tutors are able to adapt their teaching strategies to the specific needs of students, thus facilitating a more personalized and effective learning process. Investing in recruitment, ongoing training and adequate support for tutors not only increases the overall quality of the distance learning courses offered, but also directly contributes to a more enriching and satisfying educational experience for your students.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The expansion of distance learning has been a positive response to the search for more accessible and flexible education, driven by advances in information and communication technologies. However, in light of the Virtual University Solares case study, it becomes apparent that the shortage of qualified tutors is a significant challenge that not only affects individual institutions, but reflects broader issues facing distance education across the world.

The distance learning modality has grown considerably, offering educational opportunities to a diverse audience, especially those who face geographic or time restrictions.

This expansion is fueled by the ability of information and communication technologies to connect students and educators regardless of physical location. However, the lack of qualified tutors threatens to seriously compromise the quality of this type of teaching.

The shortage of tutors results in several negative consequences. Firstly, existing tutors end up overloaded, which can lead to a reduction in the quality of interactivity between students and tutors. This situation prolongs the resolution of students' doubts, directly affecting their learning experience. Student dissatisfaction not only harms their education, but can also affect the overall reputation and effectiveness of the educational institution.

The case of the Virtual Solares University clearly illustrates these challenges. The situation experienced by this institution is not unique; many others around the world face similar problems. The growing demand for qualified tutors, driven by the expansion of distance learning, creates intense competition for these professionals. Consequently, institutions need to find innovative ways to attract and retain talented tutors to ensure the quality of education offered.

To address these challenges, it is essential that distance learning institutions adopt a multifaceted approach. Firstly, improving working conditions and offering attractive incentives are key strategies for attracting qualified tutors. Furthermore, investing in the ongoing training of these professionals ensures that

they are always up to date with the latest educational methodologies and technologies.

Another crucial aspect is the use of advanced technologies to facilitate class management and improve interaction between students and tutors. Technological tools can help optimize tutors' time, allowing them to offer more efficient and effective support to students. Furthermore, establishing partnerships with other institutions or companies can be an effective way of sharing resources and knowledge, benefiting everyone involved.

In summary, the solution to the shortage of tutors in distance learning requires a comprehensive approach that involves improvements in working conditions, investments in ongoing training and the adoption of innovative technologies. Only through coordinated and strategic efforts will it be possible to overcome this challenge and ensure the quality and effectiveness of distance learning in the future.

To overcome this challenge, it is crucial that institutions adopt a proactive approach, implementing robust strategies to recruit, train and retain qualified tutors. Furthermore, it is essential to invest in innovative educational technologies that can optimize the efficiency of tutorial support, ensuring an enriching learning experience for students.

The research and best practices presented in this study highlight the importance of distance tutoring as a central element in the evolution of distance education. By addressing the challenges faced by Virtual University Solares and similar institutions, we hope to contribute to the continuous improvement of distance learning and to the provision of quality, accessible and inclusive education for all.

VI. AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTION

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