

## As diretrizes curriculares da ABEPSS frente ao avanço do ensino a distância

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### Resumo

O presente artigo tem como finalidade refletir sobre os desafios impostos pelo avanço do ensino a distância à proposta das Diretrizes Curriculares do curso de Serviço Social, elaboradas pela ABEPSS. No que concerne ao percurso metodológico, o estudo é resultado de uma pesquisa bibliográfica, de natureza qualitativa, realizada em um trabalho de conclusão de curso, cujo método de análise foi o materialismo histórico dialético de Marx. Os resultados obtidos indicam que a expansão desenfreada dos cursos de Serviço Social, sobretudo, na modalidade a distância, em função de seu caráter aligeirado e precarizado, têm reforçado as tendências contemporâneas de desqualificação profissional, abrindo as possibilidades de surgimento de um novo perfil profissional, diverso do perfil preconizado pelas Diretrizes Curriculares da ABEPSS, logo, pelo Projeto Ético-Político do Serviço Social.

**Palavras-chave:** Contrarreforma universitária. Diretrizes curriculares. Ensino a distância. Serviço Social.

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## **ABEPSS curriculum guidelines in view of the advancement of distance learning**

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### **Abstract**

This article aims to reflect on the challenges imposed by the advancement of distance learning to the proposed Curriculum Guidelines for the Social Service course, prepared by ABEPSS. In regard to the methodology, the study is the result of a bibliographical research, of a qualitative nature, carried out in a graduation final paper, which had Marx's historical-dialectical materialism method of analysis. The results indicate the uncontrolled expansion of Social Work courses, especially in the distance learning modality, due to its hasty and precarious character, it has reinforced the contemporary trends of professional disqualification, opening the possibilities for the arising of a new professional profile, different from the profile advocated by the ABEPSS Curriculum Guidelines, therefore, by the Social Work Ethical-Political Project.

**Keywords:** University counter-reformation. Curriculum guidelines. Distance learning. Social service.

## **Las directrices curriculares de ABEPSS frente al avance de la enseñanza a remota**

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### **Resumen**

El presente artículo objetiva reflexionar sobre los retos planteados por el avance de la enseñanza a distancia cuanto a la propuesta de las Directrices Curriculares del curso de Servicio Social, elaboradas por ABEPSS. En cuanto al recorrido metodológico, este estudio deriva de una investigación bibliográfica, de naturaleza cualitativa, realizada a partir de un trabajo de conclusión de curso, cuyo método de análisis fue el materialismo histórico dialéctico de Marx. Los resultados obtenidos señalan que la expansión desenfrenada de los cursos de Servicio Social, especialmente en la modalidad a distancia, han reforzado las tendencias contemporáneas de descalificación profesional, en función de su carácter aligerado y precarizado, favoreciendo la aparición de un nuevo perfil profesional, cuyo carácter se difiere del perfil preconizado por las Directrices Curriculares de ABEPSS y, en consecuencia, del Proyecto Ético-Político del Servicio Social.

**Palabras clave:** Contrarreforma universitaria. Directrices curriculares. Enseñanza remota. Servicio Social.

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## Introduction

The central aim of this work is to reflect on the challenges posed by the rapid growth of distance learning programs in Social Work to the guidelines proposed by the ABEPSS (Brazilian Association of Teaching and Research in Social Work).

The general guidelines for Social Work courses, approved in November 1996, emphasize the formation of a professional profile with theoretical-methodological, ethical-political, and technical-operative capacities. However, the approval of these guidelines has been hindered in a context marked by the dismantling of higher education. The primary measures in this context have been the privatization of public higher education institutions (HEIs), the establishment of private HEIs, and the emergence of distance learning HEIs. These trends have led to the operational mischaracterization of the guidelines by the Ministry of Education (MEC) during their approval process and the proliferation of distance learning Social Work courses, which, due to their accelerated and precarious nature, exacerbate the trend towards professional dequalification.

In this sense, the reflections gathered here aim to problematize the challenges to the implementation of the ABEPSS Curricular Guidelines in the face of the disproportionate growth of Social Work courses offered in the distance learning modality. This phenomenon is situated within the broader context of the counter-reformation of Brazilian higher education that began in the 1990s.

To address this, we first discuss the process of constructing the ABEPSS Curricular Guidelines. Next, we examine the counter-reformation of higher education and its impact on the advancement of these guidelines, particularly focusing on the mischaracterization of ABEPSS's original proposal by the National Council of Education (CNE) during the approval process.

Following this, we explore the growth of Social Work courses, primarily in the private and distance learning sectors. Finally, we address the ineffectiveness of the Curricular Guidelines in the context of face-to-face education, drawing on CFESS (Federal Council of Social Work) documents that discuss the incompatibility between distance learning and Social Work education.

The reflections discussed in this work are part of the results of a literature review conducted for a final undergraduate thesis (TCC), in which we explored "Social Work graduation in the distance learning modality and its implications for the professional training of social workers."

Methodologically, we conducted a bibliographic survey, using articles and books by authors dedicated to understanding this phenomenon as our primary sources. To capture the underlying determinants of this phenomenon, we employed Marx's historical-dialectical materialism as our method of analysis, as it allows the researcher to attain a concrete understanding of the concrete reality.

The results allowed us to identify a series of impacts on professional training, among them the lack of commitment of distance learning institutions to the ABEPSS Curricular Guidelines. Given the need to expand the debate around the Curricular Guidelines, we aim to briefly highlight the challenges faced by the Guidelines within this context.

### **The development of the 1996 ABEPSS curricular guidelines proposal**

The 1996 General Guidelines proposal for the Social Work course is the result of a long process of discussion and maturation of the debate on professional training<sup>3</sup>, coordinated by the Brazilian Association for Social Work Education (ABESS), now the Brazilian Association for Social Work Education and Research (ABEPSS), in conjunction with other representative entities of the profession: the Center for Documentation and Research in Social Policies and Social Work (CEDEPSS), the Federal Council of Social Work (CFESS), and the National Executive of Social Work Students (ENESSO).

The central focus of this debate on professional training was the revision of the 1982 minimum curriculum, aimed at updating and enhancing the critical direction assumed by the profession. The 1996 ABEPSS Curricular Guidelines proposal points towards the development of a professional profile with:

[...] theoretical-methodological, ethical-political, and technical-operative training for a theoretical-critical understanding of the historical process as a whole. This includes considering the particularities of the formation and development of capitalism and Social Work within the Brazilian reality. Additionally, it involves perceiving the

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<sup>3</sup> According to documents from ABESS/CEDEPSS, between 1994 and 1996, 200 local workshops were held across 67 academic training units affiliated with ABESS, along with 25 regional and 2 national workshops. The propositions and contributions obtained were systematized into six regional documents by the ABESS board, with representation from ENESSO and CFESS, the Social Work Consultants Group, and the Pedagogical Consultancy. This process culminated in the development of the National Proposal for the Curricular Guidelines for the Social Work course, which was reviewed at the II National Workshop on Professional Training and approved by the ABESS General Assembly in 1996 (ABEPSS, 1996, p. 03).

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demands and understanding the social significance of the profession, as well as uncovering the possibilities for actions embedded in reality and in professional practice that fulfill legal competencies and responsibilities (ABEPSS, 2014, s/p).

According to Iamamoto (2015a, p. 71), these guidelines, composed of a trio of foundational cores, allow for the articulation of a set of knowledge necessary for the professional training of social workers, considering the complexity of reality and its multiple facets.

The structuring of these cores projects the incorporation of a set of fundamental knowledge for training. The first thematic core focuses on the "theoretical-methodological foundations of social life," enabling the construction of a critical and competent professional intervention through the appropriation of the theoretical-methodological dimension, capable of understanding the social processes of bourgeois society and their underlying drivers beyond what is immediately apparent. The second core, "foundations of the socio-historical formation of Brazilian society," aims at grasping society's historical and social formation, the relationship between the State and society, political projects, social policies, social classes and their cultural manifestations, as well as social movements.

These aspects equip professionals with the understanding of the process of production and reproduction of the raw material of professional work social issues and their various expressions, which are products of the inequalities inherent in the current societal model. The third and final core pertains to the "foundations of professional work," which encompasses all the constitutive aspects of Social Work as a specialized field of labor. These contents aid in understanding the social and historical construction of the profession's constitutive elements, its limits and possibilities in the face of societal transformations from the profession's genesis to the present day. They also help integrate the theoretical-methodological, ethical-political, and technical-operative dimensions into a cohesive unit necessary for social workers to operate effectively in their socio-occupational spaces (IAMAMOTO, 2015a, p. 72).

Based on this curricular logic, courses are structured and can unfold into various curricular components organized in forms such as disciplines, thematic seminars, workshops/laboratories, and complementary activities like tutoring, extension projects, etc., in addition to supervised internships and the final graduation project (TCC), which are considered necessary activities for the curriculum (IAMAMOTO, 2015a, p.72). This logic strengthens the implementation of the university's triad

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teaching, research, and extension within academic units and innovates the educational process by incorporating a set of resources to deliver the relevant content for undergraduate education.

In contrast to the advances in the field of professional training standards, there is the enactment of the Law of Guidelines and Bases of Education (LDB) (BRASIL, 1996). The approved content of this law reflects compliance with the neoliberal agenda, as it paves the way for the dismantling of education as an inalienable social right.:

[...] as medidas desencadeadas pela aprovação da LDB – exame nacional de curso, mestrado profissionalizantes, substituição dos currículos mínimos por diretrizes curriculares, cursos sequenciais, ensino à distância em todos os níveis – seguem orientações dos organismos internacionais, no sentido do favorecimento da expansão da educação como serviço privado, de diversificação e massificação do ensino e de reconfiguração das profissões [...] (CFESS, 2015, p.15).

In a context undermined by neoliberal ideals, the implementation of the 1996 ABEPSS curricular proposal is particularly hindered by the counter-reform of Brazilian higher education, which stems from societal transformations driven by the productive restructuring of capital. Therefore, we proceed to problematize the obstacles to the approval of the 1996 ABEPSS Curricular Guidelines proposal, arising from the university counter-reform that emerged in the 1990s.

## **The Counter-Reform of Higher Education: Challenges for the Implementation of the Curricular Proposal**

The process of counter-reform of the Brazilian State, initiated under the Collor government in the 1990s, led to a significant reconfiguration of Higher Education Policy in the country. Under the directives of international organizations, higher education began to be considered a non-state public activity, which could be offered by both public and private higher education institutions.

According to Lima (2007, p. 19), the establishment of Higher Education as a service not exclusively provided by the State, while opening up endless possibilities for the private sector to offer higher education courses, also allows the State to shirk its responsibility for this level of education by reducing investments in the opening and operation of public Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Moreover, it normalizes the transfer of public funds to private HEIs.

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In this context, the process of restructuring higher education began, with the primary measures being the expansion of the private sector in providing educational services and the internal privatization of public HEIs. The first phase of this process started in 1991, under the Collor government, which, through various measures and legislative projects, initiated a series of actions aimed at redefining education (LIMA, 2007, p. 131).

The first action of the Collor government was the Proposal for Constitutional Amendment (PEC) No. 56/91, titled "Opening of the Brazilian Economy and Modernization of the University." This proposal suggested allocating a fixed percentage of the federal budget to federal universities, requiring them to cover salaries and operating expenses, leading to a series of changes to Articles 206 and 207 of the 1988 Federal Constitution, as well as affecting the autonomy of universities. The second proposal involved another PEC aimed at transforming universities into a specific type of organization, effectively removing the public servant status of education workers, thus deregulating the rights of public servants. The third action involved the denationalization of strategic sectors of the country. The fourth action was expressed through the proposal to eliminate CAPES and INEP, along with promoting the alignment of professional training with market needs, focusing solely on teaching and disconnecting it from research and postgraduate studies. The fifth action related to public funding of higher education. The sixth aspect concerned the promotion of private education expansion, which led to conflicts between the aforementioned government and the Federal Council of Education (CFE), responsible for recognizing and accrediting these private courses. (LIMA, 2007, p. 131-132).

These measures represent the first signs of the dismantling processes proposed by the World Bank and the IMF in the financial agreements made with the government in question, which further advanced through new actions and/or restrictive measures in the field of education. According to Lima (2007, p. 141), starting in 1995 under President Fernando Henrique Cardoso (FHC), the reorganization of higher education reached higher levels compared to previous governments, primarily through the sale of "educational services" and the expansion of access to undergraduate programs via the implementation of new measures and/or actions <sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> The main actions of the FHC government in the area of education were: The program of government Hands to Work Brazil that deals with the modernization of education and science and technology coexist with the drastic reduction of public funds for these areas; Political-Strategic MEC, with the purpose of stimulating partnerships between the public and private sectors for financing, offering and management of education; Creation of the National Council of Education - Law 9.131/95, which extinguishes the CFE, which is now characterized as an advisory body of the MEC, and establishes the National Examination of Courses; Proposal for constitutional amendment no 233-A, of 1995 which proposes to add, at the end of article 207 of the CF, the expression "in the form of the law; Creation of the National Examination of Undergraduate courses ENC- Law no 9.131/95 functions as a system for evaluating courses, subsidizing IES ranking; Law n°9.257/96- creation of the National Science Council and Technology, establishes co-financing public



According to data published by the Higher Education Census (2002, as cited in Lima & Pereira, 2009, p. 34), by the end of the FHC government, enrollment in public HEIs was 320,354, while in private HEIs it totaled 1,090,854. This reflects the dominance of private education over public education, driven by the need to meet the demands of international organizations under the guise of democratizing access to higher education a goal historically advocated by various social segments, particularly those from less affluent backgrounds.

The process of university counter-reform implemented by FHC reveals elements of continuity during Lula's second government (2007-2011) through the introduction of a series of provisional measures, bills, laws, and decrees, which ultimately indicate that the reconfiguration of higher education was indeed a part of his political agenda (Lima & Pereira, 2009, p. 36). The analysis of these actions suggests the existence of a social-liberal government, as it minimally addressed the interests of social actors and movements while fulfilling the demands of international financial organizations. Lima and Pereira (2009, p. 38) highlight the main characteristics of the third phase of the higher education counter-reform, which was implemented during Lula's administration (2003-2011).

The first characteristic corresponds to the strengthening of the higher education business sector. The second is reflected in the so-called Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) in the field of education, which can be seen in the University for All Program (PROUNI), which grants tax exemptions to education entrepreneurs in exchange for public slots in private HEIs. It is also evident in the Higher Education Financing Fund (FIES) for private HEIs, which offers students lower interest rates to cover the costs of higher education in private institutions, with repayment scheduled to begin after graduation. The third characteristic refers to the implementation of management contracts, such as the Support Program for the Restructuring and Expansion Plans of Federal Universities (REUNI), introduced through Decree No. 6096/07, which aims to expand access to and retention of undergraduate students in federal universities.

Still under the Lula administration, as a strategy to strengthen the private sector, there was a significant boost to distance education through Decrees 5.622/05 and 5.800/06, which established and

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and private for C&T policy, stimulating the partnership of public universities and research centers with the private sector (LIMA, 2007, p.141).

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regulated face-to-face education, and the consortium of institutions offering this modality, the Open University of Brazil (UAB) (Chagas, 2016, p. 47). Although the offering of higher education courses in the distance learning modality is relatively recent, there has been a remarkable growth. According to data from the 2017 Higher Education Census, the percentage of new enrollments in distance learning undergraduate courses increased from 15.4% in 2007 to 33.3% in 2017, equivalent to 1,073,497 new distance learning students (MEC/INEP, 2018). As per the 2017 Higher Education Census, in 2007, the number of enrollments in the distance learning modality represented 7.0% of all undergraduate enrollments, rising to 15.8% in 2012 and reaching 21.2% in 2017, which corresponds to 1,756,982 undergraduate students in the country (MEC/INEP, 2018).

It is in opposition to this context, marked by the dismantling of Brazilian higher education, that ABEPSS, along with other representative entities of the Social Work profession, fights for the consolidation of the 1996 Curricular Guidelines proposal. According to Iamamoto (2014, n.p.), ABEPSS, under the leadership of Professor Marieta Koike, secured a position within the MEC-SESU to create a commission composed of Social Work education specialists. This commission was responsible for evaluating the curricular guidelines in the field and submitting them to the National Council of Education (CNE).

From this perspective, the minimum curriculum approved in 1996 was reformulated into the format of Curricular Guidelines in 1999 by the Commission of Social Work Education Specialists and then submitted to the CNE for approval. However, the proposal presented by ABEPSS to the CNE underwent a significant process of mischaracterization during its approval, marked by a series of changes and exclusions.

[...] substantive changes were made to the final document, which distorted the content of the General Guidelines for the Social Work Course originally developed by ABEPSS. The alterations affected both the professional profile and the list of competencies, and they led to the complete removal of the subjects and course descriptions prepared by the commission of specialists in 1999 (MOTA, 2007, p. 60).

Iamamoto (2015b, p. 445) states that "the original proposal underwent significant mischaracterization concerning the social direction of professional training, as well as the knowledge and skills deemed essential for the performance of social workers." According to the author, these transformations compromise the originality of the proposed project. For example, "the profile of a

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bachelor in Social Work initially included a 'professional committed to the guiding principles and values of the Social Work Code of Ethics,' which was removed and replaced with a focus on the use of information technology" (IAMAMOTO 2015b, p. 445). Therefore, it is pertinent to highlight some of these modifications, based on the analysis of the Curricular Guidelines proposals prepared by the Commission of Social Work Education Specialists, in comparison to the Guidelines approved by the National Council of Education.

Initially, we observe the replacement of the terminology in the first section. In the ABEPSS Curricular Guidelines, it is titled "Profile of the Bachelor in Social Work," which was substituted with "Profile of Graduates." Although this substitution does not change the meaning, the wording saw the exclusion of the paragraph "Professional committed to the guiding values and principles of the Social Work Code of Ethics" (IAMAMOTO, 2015b, p. 445). According to Werner (2011), the removal of this paragraph affects the understanding of ethics as a transversal element in professional training:

[...] The profile of the bachelor envisioned ethics as a transversal element. There was a very clear discussion that ethics is not just a discipline; it is much more than that. It has an ethical-methodological and political perspective that permeates the entirety of professional training. The concern is that ethics should not be confined to civil society or social relations; it is not just the ethics as it was in 1982, reduced to a single discipline meant to address that issue. It is much more than professional ethics; it represents an ethical-political perspective (WERNER, 2011, s/p).

Regarding competencies and skills, it is noted that they were divided into general and specific categories by the CNE. Additionally, according to Iamamoto (2015b, p. 445), definitions related to the theoretical-methodological and historical orientation for analyzing social processes were removed. In the project proposed by ABEPSS, it had established a framework for these orientations:

Professional training should enable the theoretical-methodological and ethical-political training as a fundamental requirement for carrying out technical-operative activities aimed at: a critical understanding of social processes in their entirety; analysis of the historical movement of Brazilian society, capturing the particularities of the development of capitalism in the country (IAMAMOTO, 2015b, p. 445-446).

In addition, some of the technical-operational competencies and skills were eliminated, such as: formulating and executing social policies in public administration bodies, businesses, and civil

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society organizations; conducting socioeconomic studies to identify social demands and needs; performing leadership roles in public and private organizations in the field of Social Work; taking on teaching positions in Social Work and coordinating courses and teaching units; and directly supervising Social Work interns (Werner, 2011, s/p). Iamamoto (2015b, p. 446) highlights that the study topics addressing curricular content expressed in the three fundamental areas were also eliminated. These include: the theoretical-methodological foundations of social life; the socio-historical formation of Brazilian society; and the fundamentals of professional work, which are part of the curricular organization. This removal undermined the possibility of ensuring common content in the professional training process of social workers in the country.

The choice of content for professional training in Social Work is left to the discretion of academic units, whether public or private, as long as they consider the three aforementioned thematic areas (IAMAMOTO, 2015b, p. 446). It becomes evident that the flexibility of the curricular structure for professional training is a strategy employed by the Ministry of Education, under the guidance of multilateral organizations, to align the training process with market interests. According to the author, this orientation opened up the possibility for the creation of flexible and varied pedagogical projects, leaving their development to professionals and training institutions. Moreover, disciplinary content is also not regulated, which often results in the offering of courses that are inconsistent with those proposed by the original ABEPSS project.

The National Education Council (CNE) also removed items related to recommendations for encouraging the professional qualification of the student body and the duration of the course, as contained in the 1996 Curriculum Guidelines. It did not establish the necessary workload for supervised internships. The section on complementary activities remained, but the part specifying the required workload was omitted from the text.

According to the reporting committee for the approval of the Curriculum Guidelines, it was necessary to make some changes, including the removal of the item related to the course duration, which was only defined six years later, through Resolution CNE/CES No. 2, dated June 18, 2007. This resolution addresses the minimum workload and procedures related to the completion and duration of undergraduate courses, including bachelor's degrees, establishing a minimum workload

of 3,000 hours for the Social Work course over a minimum period of four years for its completion (WERNER, 2011, s/p).

The original proposal of the ABEPSS curriculum guidelines addresses an item called “Principles of Professional Formation,” which was also subject to changes, being replaced by “Organization of the Course” as it addresses the following aspects:

Flexibility of comprehensive curricula, integrating the teaching of subjects with other curricular components such as workshops, thematic seminars, internships, and complementary activities; rigorous theoretical, historical, and methodological treatment of social reality and Social Work, enabling understanding of the problems and challenges faced by professionals; establishment of investigative and interpretative dimensions as formative principles and central conditions of professional training, and the relationship between theory and reality; presence of interdisciplinarity in the professional training project; exercise of theoretical-methodological pluralism as a characteristic element of academic and professional life; respect for professional ethics; indissociability between academic and professional supervision during internship activities (BRASIL, RESOLUÇÃO, Nº 15, 2002, s/p).

Additionally, during the approval process of the curriculum guidelines, the following items were excluded: “adoption of a critical social theory that enables the understanding of social totality in its dimensions of universality, particularity, and singularity; and the indissociability of teaching, research, and extension dimensions.” (ABEPSS, 2020b, s/p).

The professional category, along with its representative entities, has systematically criticized the removal of these items, arguing that theoretical pluralism should be guaranteed and secured in professional documents (WERNER, 2011, s/p). Thus, professional training should remain grounded in Marx’s critical social theory, as this perspective, according to Boschetti (2004), guides professionals to a critical understanding of capitalist society and considers the expressions of the social question as objects of social work intervention.

By implementing such transformations, the CNE removed Marx's critical social theory, highlighting an interest in providing a graduation that is empty and uncritical, aimed at funneling a large number of professionals into the job market imbued with instrumental reason. After all, the Marxian perspective is seen as a challenge to the existing social order, as it reveals its multifaceted nature. Furthermore, by excluding the aspect concerning the inseparability of the triad of teaching,

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research, and extension, the CNE allows academic units to offer courses based solely on teaching, exempting them from carrying out activities related to research and extension.

The item "Supervised Internship and Final Paper (TCC)" was not immune to the set of changes. Upon completing the review of the Curriculum Guidelines for the Social Work course approved by the Ministry of Education, it is observed that the paragraph addressing the final paper and/or monograph was removed, with only the section regarding the supervised internship remaining.

From this perspective, it is evident that the Ministry of Education (MEC) is not concerned with the quality of professional training, as it removes elements crucial to the formation of Social Work graduates in order to cater to market interests. In summary, MEC is leading the dilution of the Curriculum Guidelines, reinforcing the deterioration of professional training conditions, as well as its simplification and devaluation, with the expansion of Social Work courses in the distance education format, which we will address further.

## **The Expansion of Distance Social Work Programs**

The undergraduate Social Work program has mirrored the broader trends in higher education growth in the country, showing a significant expansion in its offerings across public and on-site higher education institutions (IES). However, this growth has been even more pronounced in private on-site and distance education institutions. According to Pereira (2018, p. 192), between 2003 and 2016, the number of public Social Work programs created was the highest since the field's inception in the 1930s. Specifically, of the 64 public Social Work programs, 34 were established during this period, surpassing the growth levels seen during the military dictatorship. Notably, 82% of these programs, equating to 28 courses, were created in rural areas, while 18%, or 6 courses, were established in the capital. Pereira (2009, p. 273) notes that following the approval of the ABEPSS Curriculum Guidelines by the MEC under President Lula's administration, there was an exponential increase in Social Work programs, significantly involving private distance education.

Based on data collected from the E-mec system, in 2019, the total number of Social Work programs offered in the country reached 667, with 502 being private on-site, 100 private distance learning, and 65 public on-site programs. This increasing commercialization of education poses a

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threat to the profession, and consequently, to its strategic social direction. These figures confirm the trend of excessive growth in private and distance Social Work programs in recent years, which is even more concerning when examining the availability of spots. According to data from the E-mec website (2019), the 502 private on-site institutions offer 179,049 annual spots for Social Work, the 100 distance learning institutions offer 197,803 annual spots, while the 65 public on-site institutions provide only 5,143 annual spots (E-MEC, 2019).

It is noticeable that 100 distance education institutions offer more annual spots compared to the 502 private on-site institutions combined with the 65 public on-site institutions offering Social Work programs. The growth of this distance learning modality is due to the way the course is delivered, which allows for a larger number of students to be accommodated, as it does not require significant investments in infrastructure. This makes the course inexpensive and profitable for education entrepreneurs.

In this sense, it can be said that the number of distance education institutions offering Social Work programs masks the rigorous participation of face-to-face modalities in Social Work education, if we do not consider the number of spots offered by these institutions. The central issue lies in the capacity to offer places, and therefore, the absorption of students through distance education. Moreover, there is a historical trend of the private sector's participation in offering Social Work programs today. More strikingly, 90% of Social Work education occurs in private institutions, with 17% in distance education mode and 83% in face-to-face mode, while only 10% of Social Work programs are offered in public institutions.

The offering of Social Work programs in the distance education modality is exclusively provided by private institutions. The 100 distance education programs are offered by private higher education institutions (BRASIL, 2019), representing a true process of commodification of education, thus posing a threat to the profession and, consequently, to the realization of the professional Ethical-Political Project. It is evident that distance education is gaining ground in professional training and intensifying a logic of expedited, precarious, and devalued education, although these elements are also present in public and face-to-face Social Work programs in times of counter-reform.

The expansion of distance education Social Work programs benefits capital both economically and ideologically, as it provides a quick financial return without requiring significant investments for

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its provision and serves as an instrument for the reproduction of capital due to the collaborative nature of the training in these directions.

Thus, investments by distance education entrepreneurs in Social Work programs are closely related to the need to undermine the professional training process for social workers. A professional with a weakened education lacks the theoretical-methodological, ethical-political, technical-operational, and critical-analytical tools to critically understand social processes, the determinants of their work object, and to intervene in social dilemmas in accordance with the professional project:

The hypothesis is, therefore, that the professional training of new social workers, trained via distance education, will be radically different from that proposed by the ABEPSS (ABESS/CEDEPSS, 1997) Curriculum Guidelines. This will completely reshape the Social Work job market and present complex challenges for the professional organizations (PEREIRA, 2009, p. 274).

Given the lack of commitment from distance education institutions offering Social Work courses to the 1996 ABEPSS Curriculum Guidelines, as highlighted by the CFESS in its documents "On the Incompatibility Between Distance Education and Social Work," there is an urgent need to deepen and/or clarify the determinations expressed in the Curriculum Guidelines that are being disregarded by distance education institutions. This is necessary to highlight the risks and threats to the realization of the professional profile of social workers proposed by ABEPSS in the face of this expansion of distance education.

## **The Distance Learning in Social Work and the Disregard for ABEPSS Curricular Guidelines: What CFESS Documents Reveal**

Distance education disregards the ABEPSS Curricular Guidelines, as outlined in the document "On the Incompatibility Between Distance Learning and Social Work" (2015). This undermines and distorts the professional profile that supports and reveals the Ethical-Political Project for Social Work, alongside collective interests and the defense of rights.



According to data from the consulted document<sup>5</sup>, one of the aspects of the Curricular Guidelines for the Social Work Program, flagrantly disregarded by distance education institutions (IES), concerns the Course Pedagogical Project, which offers content incompatible with the professional training envisioned (CFESS, 2015, p. 21). Some examples are emblematic and reflect the departure from a training grounded in theoretical, methodological, ethical, political, technical, and operational parameters that are prerequisites for the profession. According to CFESS (2015, p. 21), "the most striking example of offering content unrelated to Social Work and the Curricular Guidelines is the provision of courses such as 'Negotiation Process,' 'Nutrition and Hygiene,' 'Mediation and Arbitration.'" Thus, it is evident that the growing expansion of distance education is accompanied by a deviation from the professional profile advocated by the category's entities. Several principles underpinning professional training contained in the 1996 ABEPSS Curricular Guidelines are being questioned.

The first principle concerns the rigorous theoretical, historical, and methodological treatment of social reality and Social Work, through which it is possible to understand the problems and challenges faced by professionals in the realm of the production and reproduction of social life (ABEPSS, 1996, p. 06). It is important to emphasize that a professional with deficiencies in the theoretical-methodological dimension has difficulties in grasping reality concretely, thus struggling to move beyond the immediate and reach the essence of things.

The second principle refers to overcoming the fragmentation of content in the curriculum organization of courses (ABEPSS, 1996, p. 06). Distance education programs in Social Work have done precisely the opposite of what the Curricular Guidelines establish and advocate, as the instructional materials used for offering the courses are simplistic. These materials consist of fragments from certain works by authors some of whom are not commonly used in quality Social Work education compiled into small books, rather than using comprehensive works by leading experts in the field of Social Work.

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<sup>5</sup> The consulted document, titled "On the Incompatibility of Distance Education and Social Work," publicly presents the results of an extensive effort by CFESS-CRESS, along with ABEPSS and ENESSO, in defense of the work and training in Social Work and against the deterioration of higher education. This is in light of the ongoing changes since the enactment of the National Education Guidelines and Bases Law (LDB) of 1996. The objective is to reveal to Brazilian society, public managers, judicial authorities, and the professional category of social workers the incompatibility between distance education and professional training in Social Work (CFESS, 2015, p. 07-08).

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According to CFESS (2015, p. 27), another principle disregarded by distance education institutions is the indivisibility of the dimensions of teaching, research, and extension. Since distance education institutions lack the structure necessary for the development of such activities, this raises concerns about the 5th principle of the ABEPSS Curricular Guidelines, which advocates for the establishment of investigative and interventive dimensions as central conditions for professional training.

Therefore, the participation of Social Work students in extension and research activities is of utmost importance. Engagement in these activities allows students to interact with social subjects in civil society, providing them with concrete opportunities to strengthen the investigative dimension and contribute to knowledge production.

Another principle outlined in the ABEPSS Curriculum Guidelines, which is ineffective in distance Social Work programs, is the inseparability between internship and academic and professional supervision (CFESS, 2015, p. 23). It is evident that the Curricular Internship in Social Work, as prescribed by the Curriculum Guidelines and the National Internship Policy, is not operationalized in distance education institutions. This is due to the lack of joint supervision between field supervisors and academic supervisors, as there are no professors available to perform the latter. As a result, students are left entirely at the mercy of the guidance of a single tutor, which constitutes a serious violation of the National Internship Policy, which stipulates a maximum of 15 interns per academic supervisor.

Studies on the impacts of distance education on the Social Work training process have shown that distance education institutions develop and execute a formation that is radically different from the process proposed by the ABEPSS Curriculum Guidelines, leading to a new professional profile that aligns with the prevailing social order (PEREIRA, 2009, p. 274). In other words, under these conditions, the graduate is likely to adopt a merely pragmatic and bureaucratic stance, limiting their professional practice to techniques, instrumentalism, and methodological approaches, thereby contributing to the reemergence of conservatism within the profession.

In this context, the Ethical-Political Project of Social Work embodied in the 1996 Curriculum Guidelines, the profession's regulatory law (Law 8662/93), and the 1993 Code of Ethics is significantly challenged in times of higher education counter-reform. This situation presents a series

of challenges to ABEPSS and other professional representative entities, affecting the strategic social direction of Social Work and the profession as a whole. These challenges extend beyond professional training, inevitably impacting professional practice and the job market. This necessitates thorough and qualified studies to explore these potential developments.

## **Final considerations**

Based on the reflections presented in this essay, we can identify that the macrostructural impacts affecting Brazilian higher education policy directly influence Social Work, challenging the realization of the profession's Ethical-Political Project. The most pressing repercussions are evident in the consolidation of the ABEPSS 1996 Curriculum Guidelines, with a significant impact being the rise of distance learning higher education institutions, which embody a diluted, precarious approach incompatible with the 1996 ABEPSS Curriculum Guidelines.

Thus, the lack of commitment from these institutions to the profession's regulatory frameworks results in a range of impacts for Social Work, as it introduces into the job market a substantial number of professionals who, for the most part, lack the necessary subjective conditions to act in line with the commitment to workers' rights upheld by the professional project. This situation can lead to the de-characterization of the professional profile, the devaluation of the profession, and consequently, the precarization of working conditions.

The Ethical-Political Project of Social Work (PEPSS) is being significantly challenged by capitalist offensives seeking to address their crises. However, it is not our role to adopt a fatalistic stance regarding the process under review, but rather to join forces with professional representative entities in an effort to develop strategies and/or mechanisms of resistance against this process.

Thus, there is a need for the development of studies and research in this direction, which will provide the category and the representative entities of Social Work with a qualified perspective on the topic. Understanding the urgency of reaffirming, in times of dismantling, the commitment to high-quality professional training and the rigorous handling of ethical-political, theoretical-methodological, and technical-operational competencies of social workers is essential.

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