

COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGES IN OFFERING DISTANCE EDUCATION COURSES AT COMMUNITY UNIVERSITIES

VANTAGENS COMPETITIVAS NA OFERTA DE CURSOS EAD EM UNIVERSITÁRIAS COMUNITÁRIAS

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ABSTRACT

The study aims to identify sources of competitive advantage in the provision of distance education courses in community universities. As for the research design, the present study is characterized as descriptive in terms of objectives, a multiple case study in terms of procedures and in terms of approach, it is characterized as qualitative. The study was carried out in two community university organizations located in southern Brazil. As a result, it was possible to verify the necessary resources to enable the offer of distance education courses, in the two cases studied, are the need to mobilize technological, human and financial resources. Although not enough resources have been found to generate sustainable competitive advantage, the adoption of the strategy itself has brought benefits to the researched universities, such as the appropriation of the technologies used in distance education and the expansion of the university. However, with regard to the ability to create value and generate competitive advantage, in the cases studied, there is some difficulty, especially in developing specific differentials for distance education courses that are valuable for students and generate sustainable competitive advantage for universities.

Keywords: Competitive Advantage. Resource-Based View. University.

RESUMO

O estudo tem como objetivo identificar fontes de vantagem competitiva na oferta de cursos EaD em universidades comunitárias. Quanto ao delineamento de pesquisa, o presente estudo caracteriza-se como descritivo quanto aos objetivos, estudo de casos múltiplos quanto aos procedimentos e quanto a abordagem, caracteriza-se como qualitativa. O estudo foi realizado em duas organizações universitárias comunitárias situadas no Sul do Brasil. Como resultados foi possível constatar os recursos necessários para viabilizar a oferta de cursos EaD, nos dois casos estudados, são a necessidade de mobilizar recursos tecnológicos, humanos e financeiros. Embora, não tenha sido constatado recursos suficientes para a geração de vantagem competitiva sustentável, a adoção da estratégia em si trouxe benefícios para as universidades pesquisadas, como apropriação das tecnologias utilizadas no EaD e a expansão da universidade. Porém, no que tange a capacidade de criar valor e gerar vantagem competitiva, nos casos estudados, observa-se certa dificuldade, principalmente em desenvolver diferenciais específicos para os cursos EaD que sejam valiosas para os alunos e gerem vantagem competitiva sustentável para as universidades.

Palavras-chave: Vantagem Competitiva. Visão Baseada em Recursos. Universidade.

1 INTRODUCTION

According to Meyer, Pascuci and Mangolim (2012), strategic management in universities has generally been associated with the arrival of a new dean, or even with a formal document, called the Institutional Development Plan (PDI), which contains the planning university strategic plan for a given period. However, this practice has not been enough to design and implement strategies at the university. The unpredictability and uncertainties of the environment associated with the characteristics of the university constitute a challenge for its managers, leading them to seek more efficient and effective forms of management (MEYER; PASCUCI; MANGOLIM, 2012).

According to Meyer, Pascuci and Andriquetto Jr (2017), in the pluralistic context that characterizes the university organization, leaders sometimes act in a contradictory way. Although university administrators seek to align strategic decisions and actions, at the same time, they neglect the specificities of this type of organization, with serious implications for the strategy formation process and also for the effective results of the decisions taken.

Meyer and Meyer (2013) state that there are university administrators who adopt managerialism in management, based on rational analytical techniques aimed at maximizing profits and by a market logic (STACEY, 2010). However, university organizations do not have the characteristics of business management models, due to the peculiar characteristics they have (MEYER; MEYER, 2013). Meyer, Pascuci and Andriquetto Jr (2017) highlight that strategic practices in university organizations do not obey the linearity, alignment or interdependence necessary for the adoption of managerialism, as their results are usually unpredictable or unintentional, reflecting the characteristics of a system that is not very efficient. articulated, complex and pluralistic.

Thus, it is emphasized that university organizations are complex systems (Stacey, 1996) whose decisions, actions and results do not follow a rational or logical sequence. In this context, Meyer, Pascuci and Andriquetto Jr (2017) state that strategies result from independent actions whose integration depends on the creation of meaning (Weick, 1979; 1995; McDaniel Jr., 2007) of the agents, the reconciliation of divergent interests and the negotiations between the ruling coalition and various groups (Cyert and March, 1963). Thus, Meyer, Pascuci and Andriquetto Jr (2017) state that although there is a need to seek to improve the performance of academic organizations, the practice of "managerialism", incorporating business models and approaches, is inappropriate for universities.

However, like any organization that intends to maintain itself, expand and achieve success in the market, the university needs to be concerned with strategies to be able to compete. Universities also have goals to meet, and they need to achieve the desired results (PEREIRA; ANTONIALLI, 2011). In the perception of Meyer and Meyer (2013), academic management cannot neglect marketing aspects and environmental changes that affect the organization and need to adapt to them.

Thus, the adoption of strategies in university administration becomes crucial in the search for prominent positions and leadership in the educational sector (KELLER, 1983; SHATTOCK, 2010; PARAKHINA et al, 2016). According to Wangenge-Ouma and Langa (2010), competition between universities is a feature of the new context of global higher education, mainly determined by the presence of multiple and diverse providers of higher education, public and private, of distance learning. (EaD) and/or face-to-face (WANGENGE-OUMA AND LANGA, 2010).

According to the Ministry of Education (MEC), there are 2,633 colleges, 328 teaching centers, 41 federal institutes and 199 universities in Brazil, totaling 3,201 HEIs (Brasil, 2019). According to the Brazilian Association of Community Universities (ABRUC), community HEIs differ from other HEIs because they are non-profit, reinvesting all the resources generated or received in full in their activities. Community HEIs are maintained by communities, churches, congregations, among others, and have a commitment to the society in which they are inserted, seeking to meet the needs of the community (BITTENCOURT et al, 2014). Community higher education institutions were qualified by Law 12,881 enacted on 11/12/2013, which officially recognizes community universities and provides for their definition, qualification, prerogatives and purposes (Brasil, 2019).

According to Bittencourt et al (2014), community HEIs have been directly affected by the expansion of the federal network and the increase in the number of for-profit private institutions and, especially, by the adhesion of the distance education modality by these institutions. Requiring, therefore, that community institutions rethink their performance, starting to adopt a new posture, impacting, among other factors, also on the offer of courses.

Pereira and Antonialli (2011) also point out that one of the aspects that boosted competition in the educational sector was distance education. According to the authors, distance education uses a technological communication system, whose teaching process is made available to a large number of people. This teaching modality enables self-learning, through systematically organized didactic resources (PEREIRA; ANTONIALLI, 2011).

The supply of vacancies in distance education grew exponentially, from around six thousand in 2000 to 1.7 million in 2010 (MANCEBO; VALE; MARTINS, 2015). In 2010, enrollments in distance education represented 14.6% of total enrollments in undergraduate higher education courses, and in 2017 they represented 21.2% (FIALHO et al, 2019). Despite this, there is sometimes a negative analysis regarding the offer of distance education courses, mainly due to the lack of commitment to the quality training of students, with the HEIs aiming only at profit and the distribution of diplomas (FARIA et al. al, 2016). So while the education sector is not as dynamic as commercial organizations are, community universities are also involved in some form of competition. As already highlighted by Lynch and Baines (2004), universities aim for a greater number of students, better qualified personnel, greater participation in public funds, among others.

The distance education modality appears as a way to expand the field of action of universities and also as a necessary variable for its maintenance and sustainability. Universities, for a long time, were demanded by society, not being necessary to be in tune with management mechanisms aimed at competitiveness, they did not need to worry intensely about media, marketing, strategy, market analysis, etc. However, currently they are faced with critical and demanding “clients” that lead them to adopt changes in their form of management, leading them to break organizational paradigms (TAGLIAFERRO; REIS, 2018). Given the above, the present study aims to identify sources of competitive advantage in the provision of distance education courses in community universities.

2 THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Vasconcelos and Brito (2004) state that one of the first references to the expression “competitive advantage” can be found in Ansoff (1965, p. 188-194), who defined it as the advantage of proactively perceiving trends in market ahead of competitors and adjust the offer based on this anticipation. However, in his later works the mention of competitive advantage disappears. Already in the late 1970s and early 1980s, competitive advantage begins to occupy a central role in the field of strategy and during the 1980s, the competitive advantage approach becomes increasingly popular. The popularization of the concept of competitive advantage occurs mainly with the publication of Porter's work entitled *Competitive Advantage* in 1985. Although in the original work published in 1980, the concept of competitive advantage does not appear prominently, in the 1985 work it receives a position central.

The concept of competitive advantage lies in two opposing currents from Neoclassical Economics and New Economics. According to Barney and Herterly (2007), the New Economy represents a movement away from Neoclassical Economics that aims to maximize profit. The departure was marked mainly by authors such as: March and Simon (1958) with the theory of administrative behavior; Penrose (1959) with the theory of the growth of the firm; and, Cyert and March (1963) with the theory of firm behavior. These authors aimed to understand the internal conflict of the firm considering that the goals emerge within the firm and change over time. These economists were interested in the structure, functioning, and consequences for firms. While economists belonging to the Neoclassical School were interested in the structure, functioning and consequences for the market.

The resource dependence perspective, an approach constructed by Penrose (1959), adopts as a fundamental unit of analysis, the resources and capabilities that the firm controls, including all the attributes that enable the firm to define and implement strategies. This perspective rests on two assumptions: (1) that resources and capabilities can vary significantly across firms and (2) that these differences can be stable. It is also assumed that resources and capabilities can be distributed heterogeneously over time and that this heterogeneity can last.

According to Barney (1991), understanding the sources of sustained competitive advantage for organizations is an important area of research in the field of strategic management. Therefore, in this field, it is important to understand the difference between three concepts: firm resources, competitive advantage and sustained competitive advantage. Firm resources include all resources, capabilities, organizational processes, information, knowledge, etc., controlled by a company that allows the company to design and implement strategies that improve its efficiency and effectiveness. The organization gains competitive advantage when it implements a value creation strategy that is not simultaneously implemented by its current or potential competitors. Sustained competitive advantage is achieved when the organization implements a value creation strategy that is not simultaneously adopted by current or potential competitors and when these other organizations are unable to duplicate the benefits of this strategy.

According to Barney (1991), to understand the sources of sustained competitive advantage, it is necessary to build a theoretical model that starts with the assumption that firm resources can be heterogeneous and immobile. It should be noted that not all firm resources have the potential for sustained competitive advantages. To have this potential, a firm resource must have four attributes, characterized as the VRIO model: being valuable, rare,

imperfectly imitable, and organized. Competitive advantage can be achieved when an organization is able to create value that goes beyond its production cost and that cannot be simultaneously implemented by current or potential competitors (CONTO; JÚNIOR; VACCARO, 2016).

Peteraf and Barney (2003) point out that the concept of competitive advantage is related to: (1) the organization's ability to create more economic value than the marginal competitor (breakeven) in its product market; and, (2) the economic value created by an organization in the course of providing a good or service is related to the difference between the perceived benefits gained by buyers of the good and the economic cost to the company. It is a vision of value creation closely aligned with fundamental economic principles. Value is expressed in terms of the difference between perceived benefits, or the customer's willingness to pay, on the one hand, and economic costs, on the other.

In addition, the creation of competitive advantage is linked to the ability that organizations have to manage their internal and external resources in order to obtain a superior positioning than their competitors, as well as create value for their consumers (SILVA; DACORSO, 2013). Creating a differential that allows the organization to achieve superior performance (PEREIRA; OLIVEIRA, 2013).

Thus, RBV became known for relating resources as generators of competitive advantage that allow an internal analysis of the organization and the development of different strategies (BARNEY, 1991; BARNEY; KETCHEN; WRIGHT, 2011). Competitive advantage can also be applied to the context of HEIs. Lynch and Baines (2004) were the first to relate competitive advantage to universities. Based on this study, other studies have approached the competitive advantage of HEIs. The next section presents studies that addressed competitive advantage in HEIs.

With regard to competitive advantage in higher education institutions, Jugdev and Mathur (2006) state that some studies have shown the existence of competitive advantages in various organizations, including HEIs. Navarro and Gallardo (2003), for example, claim that with Barney and Hesterly's (2006) VRIO model, HEIs are able to compete in a changing dynamic environment and have highly complex organizational demands. Turgay and Alhawamdeh (2013) demonstrated that, with the VRIO approach, the strategic planning developed by several universities is able to improve the global education market, maintain and improve their competitive position and capture new markets in regional and international segments.

Smith (2007) argues that universities have several competitive advantages, the most prominent being reputation. A strong reputation allows a company or educational institution to distinguish its products from those of the competition. A university's reputation can be extremely diverse. Universities have an academic reputation, a sporting reputation, and a cultural reputation, to name a few.

Also in the context of universities, Wangenge-Ouma and Langa (2010) discuss the mobilization of demands for excellence in research, teaching, community or public service and institutional management to attract resources and gain competitive advantage. The authors argue that most claims of excellence do not derive from evidence and are a misrepresentation of reality aimed at attracting resources. In making claims to excellence, universities take advantage of the experiential nature of their goods and services and the phenomenon of information asymmetry. Those targeted by these claims only discover the true excellence of the university's goods and services after consuming them.

Wangenge-Ouma and Langa (2010) state that the demands for excellence of higher education institutions, particularly in the context of commodification, constitute a response to the new competitive environment. In other words, the claims of excellence made by universities are not just mere rhetoric, but advertising strategies for the acquisition and accumulation of resources, such as students, talented researchers, funding, prestige and legitimacy. However, claims of excellence can be described as advertisements designed to elicit particularly favorable impressions and responses from the target audience. The authors point out that claims of excellence are therefore not "innocent", and can be compared to slogans and promises made by politicians in election campaigns.

Morrish and Lee (2011) analyze how the country of origin of higher education institutions can become a source of sustainable competitive advantage. Factors relevant to Chinese international students when deciding on a destination institution for study were explored. Strategically, the results revealed that New Zealand must maintain its position as a provider of quality higher education and build on two unique distinctive capabilities: its comparatively low cost and reputation as a safe country.

Sriwidadi, Arief, Prabowo and Muqarrabin (2016) investigated the influence of leadership and dynamic capabilities on sustainable competitive advantage mediated by knowledge management in private higher education institutions in Indonesia. The authors found that leadership and dynamic capabilities significantly affect sustainable competitive advantage mediated by knowledge management.

Parakhina, Godina, Boris and Ushvitsky (2016) sought to identify organizational problems in the strategic development of Russian universities to achieve strategic competitiveness. The authors identified that the problems of managing the strategic development of Russian universities include: the excessively global character of the strategic objective; inadequacy of the financial, HR, material and informational basis for carrying out the strategy; insufficiency of necessary organizational and managerial innovations; lack of a mechanism for interconnecting strategic and operational aspects in university management; etc. Furthermore, there is an imprecision of the complex “mission goals strategy” that leads to the loss of the source of direction, growth of expenses and dispersion of limited powers and assets.

Thus, according to Parakhina, Godina, Boris and Ushvitsky (2016), the management of any Russian university faces the task of forming a management model in which competencies and authorities of all management subjects and the main functional directions of activities are distributed and coordinated. In addition, it is necessary to create new mechanisms for the functioning of internal growth that correspond to external changes. This includes the selection of strategies that allow achieving unique competitive advantages through vertical and horizontal diversification; leadership in quality, cost, time and image, among others.

Sudiyatno, Indartono and Wibowo (2017) created a model for evaluating and developing university strategic planning using the VRIO model and the Times Higher Education Supplement (THES) criteria. THES is a database of the London-based TIMES Magazine, which periodically reports on issues related to higher education. In addition, the SWOT model was also used in the new proposal. The evaluation and development of the university's strategic plan model were carried out to obtain competitive advantages. Sudiyatno, Indartono and Wibowo (2017) consider that strategic planning is the process by which an organization determines its strategy or direction and makes the decision to allocate resources to achieve this strategy.

In addition to the studies presented, previous studies that were based on RBV were investigated. For that, searches were carried out in databases such as: Scopus, Web of Science, Scielo, Spell and Science Direct. The keywords used were “resource-based view”, “resource-based view” and/and “universities”, “university”. Table 1 presents the synthesis of the studies found.

Table 1 Previous studies on RBV and university

Autores	Objetivos e resultados	Revista
Lynch e Baines (2004)	They carried out a census in the United Kingdom, dedicating a study to HEIs based on primary data from longitudinal surveys. The first analysis to be highlighted is that the superior performance of an HEI could prioritize the exploitation of superior competitive resources, such as, for example, the quality of the best students; administrative staff; better quality of staff; quality in teaching and the ability to research for knowledge development. The authors concluded that universities had resources, particularly those such as knowledge, reputation and innovation that could lead to related competitive advantages.	<i>Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management</i>
Powers e McDougall (2005)	The study investigates the effects of particular feature sets on two university commercialization activities: the number of startup companies formed and the number of IPO companies to which a university had previously licensed a technology. Using data from multiple sources across 120 universities and a resource-based view of the firm's structure, it was found that a set of the university's financial, human, and organizational resources was a significant predictor of one or both outcomes.	<i>Journal of Business Venturing</i>
Nassif e Hanashiro (2008)	The study aimed to identify the skills required of university professors from private universities in São Paulo, as a key element to increase the competitiveness of these institutions. The results revealed that the competence of teachers is not evidenced as a factor of competitiveness. Investments in infrastructure and monthly fee constitute a competitive advantage.	Revista de Administração Mackenzie
Pereira e Forte (2008)	Objective to identify which resources or competences were and are important for the HEIs of Fortaleza, in the pre and post LDB/96 periods. The results showed that, despite the existence of a set of resources common to the two moments of history, the environmental characteristics of each period translated needs for specific competences, highlighting the importance of adapting the RBV to the external contexts where the institutions are inserted.	RAC
Alencar e Forte (2009)	The objective was to analyze the relationship between strategic resources and continuous strategies, with the organizational size applied to Universities in Brazil. The analysis of results shows that Brazilian universities make use of their resources and practice the continuous strategy in their management, although with some restrictions, and also reveals that the practice of these actions does not depend on the size of the university.	Rev. Ciênc. Admin.
Souza, Forte e Oliveira (2012)	The objective was to identify the dimensions of strategic resources used by private HEIs in the Northeast Region for a most likely scenario of occurrence in the 2009/2015 period. The results show that HEIs are valuing resources that do not provide a competitive advantage.	Revista Ibero-Americana de Estratégia
Martins, Maccari, Storopoli e Andrade (2013)	In this research, the strategies and allocation of resources in Brazilian stricto sensu graduate programs in the areas of Administration, Accounting Sciences and Tourism were analyzed. As a result, it was found that the programs presented deliberate strategies systematically over the years, aiming to improve their performance in the CAPES evaluation system. As a result, the Programs have improved their research structures and made resources available to their researchers so that they can broaden their focus on research activities and guidance. It was also found that the programs that increased their grade consecutively in the three evaluation triennia (2001 to 2009) and those that obtained grades six and seven in the triennium 2007-2009 used the CAPES evaluation system as the great guide strategic.	Revista GUAL

Autores	Objetivos e resultados	Revista
Bobe e Kober (2015)	Based on the TBR, the objective of this work was to develop a framework and an instrument to measure the organizational capabilities of schools/university departments. The findings confirm that effective management and coordination of research, teaching and networking with key stakeholders are keys to success.	<i>Education + Training</i>
Gonçalves, Vieira e Stallivieri (2016)	The study presents the application of a research based on a framework to identify and analyze the changes over time in the strategic resources resulting from the development process of an HEI located in the Serra Gaúcha (southern Brazil), aiming to contribute to the understanding of the factors that underlie the competitive capacity in the light of the VBR. The analysis of different contemporary models and theories, together with the results obtained in the research, allow us to conclude that, in the studied HEI, the strategic resources underwent modifications, their characteristics being altered during the development process. These changes were promoted by historical decisions and the entry of new knowledge. Therefore, for the HEI to be successful, its strategic resources must be worked in two ways. First, through learning, instrumentalized by the absorptive capacity; and second, by understanding historical events that can reinforce or remove the strategic character of resources.	Revista GUAL
Christiano, Gohr e Gomes (2016)	This study analyzes, from the perspective of professors from a private higher education institution, whether knowledge is considered a strategic resource and source of competitive advantage. It was possible to verify through field research that most teachers evaluate the resources related to knowledge as generators of competitive parity in the face of competition, as they classify it as valuable. Thus, it was found that aspects related to socialization, externalization, combination and internalization of knowledge are only partially converted to the sustainable competitive advantage of the studied organization.	Informação & Sociedade
Petry et al (2017)	The study sought to highlight the resources used by an HEI in the search for competitive advantage, based on the precepts of the resource-based view. The research used the physical, human and organizational capital resources that the institution uses in the search for its competitiveness. The result also made it possible to highlight factors and resources that can be improved and used to further increase their competitiveness in the market.	Revista GUAL

Source: Prepared by the author.

In the context of distance education, no studies were found that identified strategic resources that generate competitive advantage for the university, a significant part of the studies focus on topics such as satisfaction and quality of education. Something similar was found in the study by Karpinski et al (2017), who point out four essential factors for the success of the HEI in the distance education modality, which can be classified as: Environment and Didactic/Pedagogical Organization; Reputation of the Course and Institution; Qualification - Tutor-Teachers and Course Structure. The study sought to identify the most relevant critical factors that contribute to the competitive advantage of the

specialization course in municipal public management, in the distance modality, at a state university in the state of Paraná, from the perspective of academics.

3 METHODOLOGY

As for the research design, the present study is characterized as descriptive in terms of objectives, a multiple case study in terms of procedures and in terms of approach, it is characterized as qualitative.

The case study technique that, according to Yin (2010), allows the empirical investigation of a phenomenon in depth. And it also allows the study to present rigor, robustness, replication logic. Regarding the selection of cases at the broadest level, community universities that are members of the Santa Catarina Association of Educational Foundations of the ACAFE System were chosen. The ACAFE System, as it is known, is a non-profit society created on May 2, 1974 with the aim of developing higher education in Santa Catarina. 16 Educational Foundations participate in the Association, 11 of which are universities and 5 university centers. Thus, for the selection of cases, community universities that are part of the ACAFE System that have had distance education courses for at least five years were chosen, characterizing, according to Yin (2016), an intentional sample, and later, the sample was considered by accessibility.

The study prioritized community universities that have been offering distance education courses for more than 5 years, since the university's Institutional Development Plan (PDI) covers a time span of 5 years. The PDI was instituted by the MEC through Law nº 10.861, of April 14, 2004, it includes a schedule and methodology for implementing the university's objectives, goals and actions. In this way, it is possible to examine the formation of strategy and decision-making processes related to the offer of distance education courses at the university.

Thus, an invitation was sent to carry out the study in universities that met the analysis criteria: time spent in distance education and community, obtaining positive responses from three universities. However, in one of them, after numerous attempts to contact and schedule it, it was not possible to obtain a minimum number of subjects who were willing to participate in the research. Thus, this research focuses on two universities, Alpha and Beta.

At the narrowest level, the research subjects were selected according to the following criteria: members who participated in the process of offering distance education courses at the university, including in collegiate bodies, occupying decision-making functions.

In qualitative research, interviews are used when researchers are unable to see the actions. One can turn to the people who participate or have participated in the phenomena (STAKE, 2005). The research instrument was developed based on the study constructs, as shown in Table 2. It is also worth noting that in the elaboration of the research instrument, 3 pre-tests were carried out, each with an average time of 45 minutes, with people who participated of the process of offering distance education courses at a university. This prior verification made it possible to make adjustments to the research instrument in order to respond to the proposed objective.

The interviews were conducted between December 2018 and October 2019, face-to-face, mediated by technology, via Skype or through a form. All interviews were carried out with the authorization of the interviewee and signature of the Free and Informed Consent Term (see TCLE). It is noteworthy that the interviews were carried out only after the approval of the research project by an Ethics Committee. After data collection, they were transcribed for data analysis. Table 1 presents the identification of the research subjects.

Table 1 Identification of research subjects

IES	Identificação	Cargos
Alfa	E1	IT Coordination, Administrative Management, Administrative Director and Dean of Undergraduate Studies.
	E2	Coordinator of Alpha Virtual. EaD modality course coordinator.
	E3	Dean of Research, Extension and Graduate Studies.
	E4	IT Coordinator, Coordinator of Alfa Virtual.
	E5	Academic Vice Chancellor.
	E6	Rector – Vice-Rector – Pro-Rector.
	E7	Coordinator of courses and Alfa Virtual
Beta	E8	Course coordinator
	E9	Course coordinator
	E10	Course Coordinator and President of CPA
	E11	Course coordinator
	E12	Course coordinator
	E13	Course coordinator
	E14	Course Coordinator and Teaching, Research and Extension Manager at the Virtual Beta Campus.
	E15	Course coordinator
	E16	Campus Director

Source: Research data.

Transcripts of interviews and documents totaled 1,097 pages. Considering the objectives of the study, for data analysis, content analysis was used with the use of conceptual categorization. Qualitative content analysis is an empirical, methodological approach that analyzes texts within their communication context (KOHLBACHER, 2006). Content analysis is one of the classic procedures for analyzing textual material. One of its main aspects is the

use of categories, often obtained from theoretical models (FLICK, 2009). The coding used in the study was the a priori coding derived from the researched literature in which a predefined list of codes is built. Coding was performed with the help of the MaxQDA 2018 Program. Table 1 presents the constructs, definitions and authors considered in the study.

It is noteworthy that the study was developed in accordance with the guidelines and standards for research with human beings contained in Resolution No. 466/12 of the National Health Council/Ministry of Health. The project was approved by the Ethics Committee for Research with Human Beings. Humans, on October 26, 2018, Opinion No. 2,983,286.

Table 2 Research constructs

Construtos	Categorias analíticas	Definição	Autores
Resources	Essential resources	Resources developed and controlled by the organization that allow implementing strategies.	Barney (1991) e Barney e Hesterly (2007).
	New resources	Resources continuously developed by the organization that allow implementing strategies.	
Competitive advantage	Benefits generated	Value creation strategy through resources that generates benefits for the organization.	
	Competitive differentials	Value creation strategy through resources that generates competitive advantages capable of improving the competitive position.	

Source: Prepared by the authors.

4 ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

In this section, a comparison of the cases studied is presented in order to find convergences and divergences between the findings and the theory. From the interviews carried out in the two universities surveyed, it was possible to highlight the main points in relation to each construct of the study. Next, in Table 3, a summary of the resources mobilized to offer distance education courses in universities is presented.

Table 3 Summary of results in relation to resource mobilization

Categories	Alpha case	Beta case
Essential resources mobilized	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Creation of own platform - Teaching Portal - Creation of material and content - Structure for internet - Training of teachers to work in distance education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Technological resources (teaching portal and technological structure for content production). - Human resources (people/teachers with expertise in distance education). - Financial resources to enable the offer of distance education courses.
Resources continually mobilized	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Teacher training - Updating of technologies used in distance education - Updating models and teaching materials 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - New technologies - Content update, - Updating the management model - Updating of learning models.

Source: Research data.

In Alfa's case, time was a relevant factor in the response to the market regarding the offer of distance education courses, since the university needed to develop and mobilize resources that it did not have, such as the qualification of the faculty to work in the modality, technologies and production of contents. In the case of Beta, the university chose to hire people with expertise in the EaD modality, a fact that gave greater agility in mobilizing the necessary resources to offer EaD courses. In this sense, the two cases corroborate the statement by Hoskisson et al (2009) that the decisions that managers make in relation to resources, capabilities and essential competences significantly influence the performance of the organization.

Over time, core competencies and resources have needed and need to be constantly developed and mobilized for the sustainability of the strategy. Thus, it can be seen in Table 3 that investment in teacher training, pedagogical models and materials and technology are resources that needed to be continually mobilized. These findings corroborate the assertion by Wangenge-Ouma and Langa (2010) that universities, like other organizations, require a wide range of resources that need constant maintenance, resulting in the acquisition and accumulation of resources. Higgins (2005) and Hambrick and Canella (1989) state that an organization cannot successfully execute a strategy without obtaining additional resources.

It is important to highlight the statement by Hoskisson et al (2009) that any resource considered individually does not generate a competitive advantage. The advantage comes through joining, combining and integrating a set of resources. In this case, the adoption of a resource management process necessary for the offer of distance education courses is to be effective for the implementation of the strategy. In this sense, the creation of an independent body for on-site courses, as happened with Alfa Virtual and Beta Virtual, contributes to the management of the modality and to the mobilization of the necessary resources for the implementation of the offer of distance education courses, allowing greater autonomy in what pertains to your decisions. Sirmon and Hitt (2003) also suggest that organizations use a management model that includes resource inventory (assessment, addition and elimination), resource aggregation and resource use.

Regarding the competitive advantage in the universities surveyed, the benefits and competitive advantages generated by the offer of distance education courses were investigated, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4 Summary of results in relation to competitive advantage

Categories	Alpha case	Beta case
Benefits of offering distance education courses generated for the university	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Appropriation of ICTs - A different way of offering courses to the community and students. - Introduction of hybrid courses, reducing monthly fees. - Relearn a new way of teaching. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Expansion of knowledge - Meeting the demands of people seeking to graduate from a course - Financial resources - Visibility and expansion of the university in all Brazilian states - Brand strengthening
Competitive differences from the competition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Credibility, - Complete structure in all poles, - Master and PhD professors in distance education answering students' doubts. - Teaching quality. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Long-time professors at the university, with experience. - Possibility to work in teaching, research and extension - Approximation between teachers and students, even on the virtual platform. Teacher-tutor and non-tutor generalist. - Own material - Own team - Course portfolio (variety) - Master teachers and doctors (teacher-tutor) - Pioneering in offering exclusive courses and courses.

Source: Research data.

As can be seen in Table 4, the strategy of offering distance education courses generated many benefits and competitive advantages for the university, as pointed out by the interviewees. However, it is important to note that Barney (1991) states that an organization can obtain competitive advantage when it implements a value creation strategy that is not practiced simultaneously by current or potential competitors. The offer of distance education courses is not a strategy that was implemented only by the researched universities. It is even possible to verify that in the external environment, mainly for-profit private HEIs, invest heavily in distance education. Although it is noteworthy that in the 2000s, when universities started to offer courses in the distance education modality, the competitive context was different. In the 2000s, there were few HEIs operating in the distance education modality, thus being innovative for the time.

Peteraf and Barney (2003) state that competitive advantage is related to the organization's ability to create value, expressed in terms of the difference between the perceived benefits of competition in a given sector. In the context of community universities, value creation is related to their economic sustainability, especially in terms of the number of students, since their objective is not profit, but to seek to meet social objectives in the region in which it is inserted, while remaining economically sustainable. For students, the advantage is mainly related to economic value. The monthly fees for distance education courses were

much lower compared to face-to-face courses. In addition to other advantages such as time, autonomy and access facilities. There is a difference between the student attending an in-person undergraduate degree and distance education. Universities had the perception that this could impact their competitiveness in the future.

Although it is possible to identify competitive advantages in the universities studied, as shown in Table 4, it is important to point out that the price is a relevant and decisive factor for enrolling in an HEI, in the student's perception, as mentioned by the interviewees from the universities. In this sense, some studies had already shown that the price and also the flexibility provided by distance education are motivating factors for students. Nassif and Hanashiro (2008) found evidence that the competence of teachers does not stand out as a factor of competitiveness. Investments in infrastructure and monthly fee constitute a competitive advantage.

Also, Fiuza and Sarriera (2013) identified that the reasons for permanent adherence to the distance education modality are flexibility, free of charge, logistics, modality, accessibility and the possibility of reconciling other tasks with studies. In addition, the importance given to the reputation of the institution as well as to the quality of both the HEI and the course and the pedagogical and operational team involved was highlighted. Mondini et al (2014) identified that the flexibility of hours, the value of the monthly fees and the acceptability of the HEI in the market were the most indicated by the students as important for choosing the HEI. Netto, Guidotti and Santos (2017) found that the main reasons for evasion are financial, lack of time, non-adaptation to the method, believing that the distance learning method is easier and the mandatory presence of face-to-face tests.

Also considering the VRIO model proposed by Barney (1991), the universities were asked about their rare, valuable, inimitable and organized resources in order to analyze whether they have a sustained competitive advantage. The answer is presented in Table 5.

As can be seen in Table 5, many of the resources defined by universities as valuable, rare, inimitable and organized may not actually correspond to a sustainable competitive advantage, since they are common resources, found in other HEIs that offer distance education courses and there are still resources that have been posted but are expected to support the offering. It is worth highlighting here the researcher's perception at the time of data collection, the insecurity and lack of knowledge on the part of the interviewees when reporting the types of resources, a fact that reinforces the need for universities to think in strategic terms to seek and achieve sustainable competitive advantages in offer of distance education courses.

Table 5 Application of the VRIO model

Recursos	Caso Alfa	Caso Beta
Valuable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Teachers prepared to work in distance education *Quality of teachers (Masters and Doctors) *Human Resources *Structure of the poles *Technological structure - Teaching Portal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Teachers and technical staff *Team Commitment *Competence and experience *Financial resources * Own virtual environment
Rare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *image, credibility and brand. *quality of faculty (degree) *pole structure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Teachers and Technical Staff *In-house content production *Time and Cohesion between human capital
inimitable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Commitment of Unoesc *special service *regional recognition *teacher qualification *respect for the brand in the region 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Personality and personalization on the virtual platform *Human capital
Organized	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * structuring for distance education (department) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Campus structure

Source: Research data.

Thus, the aforementioned studies point out that competitive advantage may be related to several factors or a combination of them. It is up to the universities studied to carry out this survey with their stakeholders and seek actions that demonstrate their competitive advantage and make them competitive in the market.

5 CONCLUSION

The present study aims to identify sources of competitive advantage in the provision of distance education courses in community universities. Based on the results found in the researched community universities, it can be observed that, in order to offer distance education courses, it is necessary to mobilize specific resources, especially with regard to technology and training of people, in addition to financial support that makes it possible to implement innovations.

The adoption of the strategy itself brought benefits to the researched universities, such as the appropriation of the technologies used in distance education and the expansion of the university. However, with regard to the ability to create value and generate competitive advantage, in the cases studied, there is some difficulty, especially in developing specific differentials for distance education courses that are valuable to students. Universities rely heavily on differentials that serve students of on-site courses such as credibility, master professors and doctors. The Beta case highlights aspects closer to the distance education

modality such as the virtual platform and differences regarding tutoring and course portfolio. The fact of being a pioneer in the offer of distance education courses does not support a competitive advantage to obtain a competitive advantage, as well as the possibility of working in teaching, research and extension, since this factor is inherent to the type of organization that is the university, being a mandatory requirement.

Many of the resources identified as rare, valuable, inimitable and organized by the interviewees do not actually show a package of resources capable of generating sustainable competitive advantage, which is a critical factor in the research. This factor suggests the need for more investigations, including at a broader level, with the participation of different models of universities and HEIs in general.

As for the limitations of the study, it is worth noting that because the offer of distance education courses in universities have been analyzed based on actions carried out in the past, it was not possible to adopt observation as one of the data collection methods. However, although it is a relevant technique, the fact of not being able to use it did not compromise the study.

Finally, it is worth highlighting the relevance that distance education has been achieving both for students who seek academic training through affordable and flexible courses, allowing students to work and study at the same time without many difficulties, as well as for professors and university administration. that need to offer an environment whose conditions allow a good formation to the academic. EaD requires universities to adopt and implement specific structures in relation to face-to-face teaching, focusing mainly on the mobilization of technological and human resources. After all, we are living in a time when there are many more students in the virtual environment than in the face-to-face environment, with the prospect that this scenario will become more and more accentuated. The COVID 19 pandemic has made this even more evident.

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