

# Distance Education in South America

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## INTRODUCTION

This article reviews the history, state of the art, and future trends in distance education in South American countries through an overview of the main experiences in the region.

South America is in the western hemisphere connected to Central and North America by the Isthmus of Panama. Twelve countries form this continent: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Paraguay, Peru, Suriname, Uruguay, and Venezuela. As reported by the United Nations Development Programme (2004), all of them are developing countries characterized by a difficult social reality as a result of political and economic crisis in the course of its history.

South American countries' basic indicators (see Table 1) show an average gross domestic product

per capita three to 30 times lower than those from developed countries. Despite the sustained growth of access to information and communication technologies, with an average DAI (digital access index) of 0.47 (ITU, 2003) and a bandwidth growth rate of 479% between 2001 and 2002 (Parkes, 2004), only 8.7% of the South American population has access to the Internet.

Multiethnic, multicultural, and geographically dispersed nations cause a gap, a social inequality between urban and rural populations, therefore governments as well as international institutions and nongovernmental organizations have been using different kinds of technologies to increase access to education (see Table 2) as a way to improve the standards of living and to reduce poverty.

*Table 1. South American countries' basic indicators (2003)*

Country	Population (millions)	GDP (gross domestic product) per Capita in 2002 (U.S. \$)	Telephone Lines	Cellular Mobile Subscribers	Internet Users	Personal Computers	DAI
Argentina	36.98	11,180	21.88	17.76	11.20	8.20	0.53
Bolivia	8.41	935	7.14	16.67	3.24	2.28	0.38
Brazil	175.96	2,603	22.32	26.36	8.22	7.48	0.50
Chile	14.71	4,413	23.04	42.83	23.75	11.93	0.58
Colombia	43.78	1,874	20.03	14.13	6.24	4.93	0.45
Ecuador	13.00	1,076	11.91	18.41	4.38	3.11	0.41
Guyana	0.89	828	9.15	9.93	14.22	2.73	0.43
Paraguay	5.93	967	4.61	29.85	2.02	3.46	0.39
Peru	27.42	2,124	6.71	10.61	10.39	4.30	0.44
Suriname	0.53	1,860	15.17	31.95	4.16	4.55	0.46
Uruguay	3.41	3,640	27.96	19.26	11.90	11.01	0.56
Venezuela	25.70	5,105	11.27	25.64	5.06	6.09	0.47
South America	356.72	3,050	15.10	21.95	8.73	5.84	0.47

Source: ITU (2004)

Note: The ITU's digital access index measures the overall ability of individuals in a country to access and use new ICTs on a scale of 0 to 1, where 1 is the highest access (ITU, 2003).

Table 2. Some distance education projects in South America

Country	Project	Technology	Educational Level	Year	Approximate Number of Involved Learners
a. Colombia	Acción Cultural Popular Radio Sutatenza	Radio + texts	Basic education for rural adults and children	1947-1989	8 million over the years
b. Bolivia	Radio mathematics Radio health Early childhood development	Radio Radio Radio	Mathematics: primary grades 2-5 Health orientation Child development for careers	1986 1992 1994	250,000 in 1994
c. Brazil	Fundação Roberto Marinho-Rede Globo Telecurso 2000	Television + texts	Primary, secondary, and vocational education for out-of-school people	1995	7 million by TV 5.2 million texts sold 200,000 formerly enrolled in 1999
d. Venezuela	Math	Radio	Basic math	1991	3 million in 1999
e. Chile	Enlaces	Computers + Internet	National primary and secondary school network	1992	2.87 million in 2002 3 million projected for 2005
f. Brazil	Proinfo	Computers + Internet	National primary and secondary school network	1997	150,464 teachers 6 million students 7.5 million projected
g. Colombia	CRECE Escuela Virtual	Computers + Internet	Computer-based learning in some primary and secondary schools	1998	10,949 rural students in 2002 1,000 urban students in 2002
h. Peru	Huascarán	Computers + Internet	National primary and secondary school network	2001	2.25 million in 2003 7.45 million projected for 2010
i. Venezuela	Fundabit	Computers + Internet	Basic education	2001	40,543 teachers 357,453 students 197,070 other users
j. Argentina	Educar	Computers + Internet	Rural schools national network	2002	6,000 in 2002

Source: for a, b, and d, Perraton & Creed (2001); for c, Wolff et al. (2002); for g, Cardona, Arango, & Trujillo (2003); for e, f, h, i, and j, Web sites for each project

## HISTORY

South American countries have been involved in distance education since the beginning of the last century. Different approaches have been applied in the implementation of distance education projects: government management, private sponsors, branches from public or private universities, and management and sponsorship by nongovernmental organizations or some mixture of them with the help of international institutions like the Catholic Church, UNESCO, The World Bank, UNDP, FAO, and so forth. As on the rest of the world, each form of technology, from the postal service to Web services, has been used as delivery systems.

In 1904 International Schools from the United States started to sell correspondent courses through a branch office in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. In 1923 Edgard Roquete Pinto, one of the pioneers of distance education in Latin America, created the Rádio Sociedade do Rio de Janeiro (Radio Society of Rio

de Janeiro, later renamed Radio Ministry of Education) with the aims of “bringing every place some education, teaching and enjoyment” (Vianney, 2003, p. 74). In 1947 clergyman (later monsignor) José Joaquín Salcedo founded Radio Sutatenza in the Andean mountains of Colombia, where 80% of the people were illiterate at that time. For more than 40 years, Salcedo’s goal to *help people in their self-development* was accomplished (Gumucio Dagron, 2001). When the project was closed in 1989, 10 million books were distributed, and 25,000 rural leaders and 8 million people were trained in basic education, health, and agricultural techniques. Through its existence, Radio Sutatenza was a model for distance education projects in Asia, Africa, and Latin America (Gumucio Dagron, 2001).

In 1961 in Lima, the capital city of Peru, the Catholic Church established Panamericana Teleducación, the first telescuola (teleschool) using television programmes as a complement to formal education; 3 years later in 1964, Manuel Benavides

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