Laying the foundations for change

As the Dilma administration strives to fuel innovation and growth in the Brazilian economy, the issue of access to quality education is taking centre stage. With a new national plan to boost education expenditure to 10 percent of GDP and a renewed focus by Brazilian academic institutions on collaboration with industry and technology creation, Brazil’s education sector looks set to make an important contribution to the nation’s future.

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Time for an education revolution

OVERVIEW Successive governments have failed to address Brazil’s most urgent structural needs. Today, as this young democracy finds its voice, the government is being forced to listen and take action. With the better life Brazilians seek dependent on better education for all, does the country have what it takes to build a better future?

Brazil is shifting awkwardly in the glare of international scrutiny. Where once the government was able to deflect or divert unwanted attention, running from the demands of a challenging reality is no longer an option and popular protests have become commonplace. In response to this, President Dilma Rousseff’s second term in office began with a new look cabinet and the admission that difficult times were ahead; questions would be asked if the country was to get back on track. This was an honest self-assessment from a president who had inherited enviable approvals ratings from her predecessor Luiz Inacio ‘Lula’ da Silva, only to see them gradually diminished in recent years as evidence piled up of an unsustainable, heavily subsidised boom that masked the country’s underlying problems.

The headlines haven’t all been bad. Education was at last placed on top of the agenda during the election campaign, a far-reaching solution has been required, Brazilian creativity isPipe down, unrespectful man. You have no right to demand my attention but now I have no right to demand yours.

The urgency to make that jump lies in a worsening skills gap pointing to critical shortcomings in the education system, promising to include another 12 million children currently outside of the school system over the next four years. Meanwhile, unemployment fell to a record low of 4.3 percent in December 2014, although productivity is also falling after a meagre 1.1 percent improvement over the last decade. Ranked 126th out of 183 countries for ease of doing business, Brazil’s competitive edge remains severely blunted by bureaucracy. “The World Bank highlighted Brazil as one of the worst countries to do business in, but we are making some dramatic changes,” said small business secretary Guilherme Afif Domingos. “We are going to jump from the Middle Ages straight to the digital era.” The urgency to make that jump lies in a worsening skills gap pointing to critical shortcomings in the education sector.

According to a survey by global employment agency Manpower, 68 percent of employers in Brazil have experienced difficulty in recruiting the right workforce. While ministers promise to bring the time it takes to open a company down from 150 days to just five, recruiting sufficiently skilled labour is the next hurdle.

Historically speaking, when a game-changing solution has been required, Brazilian creativity has shone through. In adapting sugar cane, cattle or the humble soybean to the tropical environment, or developing the means to drill for oil deeper and further offshore than ever before, the country has grown to become a world leader in research and production. The next stage is to go beyond self-sufficiency to adding value at home before selling to the international market. “Maybe Brazil’s problem isn’t creating entrepreneurs but rather turning innovative ideas into solid technology within a system that is outdated,” points out Bernardo Gracin, CEO of the country’s pioneering education company GranBio.

Already the seventh-largest economy in the world, Brazil has the ingredients to become a fertile ground in which entrepreneurialism, for so long stymied by introverted and protectionist administrations, can flourish, both within and beyond its borders. Today, the country is starting to make deep, far-reaching changes to its saturated consumption-based model in order to progress and fulfil its potential as a global economic force. Brazil’s dream of becoming the much-vaulted centre of innovation and technology in the southern hemisphere finally looks within reach.

To achieve that dream, however, the education sector needs solutions on a continental scale that successive administrations have failed to deliver. With state investment promising to reach 10 percent of GDP by 2023, the funds are finally available to extend the reach of education, narrow the inequality gap and shape the next generation of Brazil’s citizens and entrepreneurs.

Preparing for success

Brazilian business is accustomed to its companies’ drive for competitiveness, but a culture of antitrust self-help has plagued big companies for decades. The resulting high turnover rate had a drastic impact on productivity. Multinationals report having to spend up to 40 percent more on HR in Brazil, while the retail sector experiences turnover rates of up to 50 percent. One company, however, is bucking the trend. Grupo Pão de Açúcar is the retail giant behind some of the country’s biggest high street stores. Strong company values and investment in the training and education of its 110,000 employees has paid dividends. Staff turnover is down to 26.5 percent, paving the way for the next phase to follow.
Education becomes a priority for Brazil

POLICY Education is at the top of the government’s agenda with a ten-year plan to tackle the blight of low-quality teaching, high drop-out rates and functional illiteracy that has plagued the Brazilian system.

The Brazilian educational sector stands at an important crossroads. For decades regarded as a priority rather than a right, the recent universalisation of access to basic schooling has been a trying, but ultimately successful, process. The challenge that the country faces today is ensuring that the quality of education is not reduced. Children in the public school system continue to suffer from a lack of resources and quality education, which is especially evident in rural and remote areas.

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The government’s national education plan (PNE) was finally passed into law in July 2014. It aims to set goals covering all aspects of pre-school to professional training within a ten-year timeframe, and to have more than 32 strategies by which to achieve them. Here are the key proposals:

- **Investment**
  - Funding for education is to increase from 5 percent of GDP to at least 7 percent by the 50th year of the plan and on past investments. The plan will also increase investments in ensuring that students have the tools to achieve universal access to resources, facilities and training.

- **Impact**
  - The plan aims to ensure that all children will be able to read and write by the third year of secondary school, and by 2026 by 90 percent.
  - It aims to achieve universal access to resources, facilities and training.

- **Quality**
  - Quality in education will be supported by the creation of the National Education Council which will be responsible for the development and implementation of policies and plans for education.

- **Teachers**
  - The plan will create a national education council responsible for the development and implementation of policies for teachers and education quality.

- **Higher Education**
  - The plan aims to increase the number of places for young people to enter secondary education and increase access to pre-university education by at least 10 percent, while also ensuring that 75 percent of teachers have a minimum educational level of a bachelor’s degree or higher.

During his visit to the country in April last year, the UK’s chancellor of the exchequer, George Osborne, announced the creation of the Newton Fund, designed to strengthen research and innovation partnerships between the UK and emerging countries like Brazil. The initiative will see £375 million invested over five years and aims to promote international partnerships in development and welfare that will create leading future innovation. The sentiment was echoed by Sergio Gargoni, president of Confap with whom he signed the reciprocal agreement. “This is an important step in the development of a new era of cooperation between the UK and Brazil”, said Gargoni.

**“We have been evaluating graduate courses since 1974 – even the British system was only implemented in the 1990s.”**

Jorge Guimarães

**A DIPLOMATIC VIEW**

**Where do you see opportunities for collaboration between the two countries?**

Brazil has extraordinary opportunities. It has some big bbloneks, and I think the UK is a country which is particularly around technology and infrastructure. We see that already in oil and gas. **What is the current mood among Brazilian investors towards Brazil?**

I think there are a lot of people who do not see this as a financial market. We have to separate the stock and the flow. The flow is not going to other countries but the stock of Brazil is enormous and the opportunities are huge. The British firms who stick at it do very well here.

**What collaborations do you see in the education sector?**

Under the government’s new Newton Fund, there are post-docs doing joint research with the UK and Brazil. Statistics show that there is an enormous attraction effect for Brazilians who joint publish a British manuscript more so than with any other nationality.

**“Under the government’s new Newton Fund, there is joint research between the UK and Brazil”**

**A Bilateral meeting**