

Cooperation without borders

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Aloizio Mercadante is an economics graduate of the University of São Paulo, and obtained his PhD at the State University of Campinas. He was one of the founders of the Workers' Party in which he rose to become its National Vice President. He has served in both Houses of Congress, becoming party leader in both. In 2010, he unsuccessfully ran for the office of Governor of the State of São Paulo. The following year he became this government's Minister of Science, Technology and Innovation. Earlier this year he was appointed Minister of Education.

In 1997, British Prime Minister Tony Blair established that the three main priorities for his government would be education, education and education.

The leaders who followed him, including current prime minister David Cameron, have also maintained education as the highest priority in their policies. Therefore education is, quite rightly, a strategic priority of the British state, enacted through long-term non-partisan policies.

Now, if I were asked what the three main priorities for Brazil would be in its bilateral cooperation with the United Kingdom, I would say they are also education, education and education – though not necessarily in that order. More specifically, I would say the priority in our bilateral cooperation is education, education, education, science, technology and innovation.

This is not a mere play on words; no other theme is more crucial and future-defining than this one.

President Dilma Rousseff established that the field of knowledge should be the core area for the whole of our international cooperation programme. For us, it is a strategic priority. The countries that are willing to get closer to Brazil must also be ready to cooperate in a frank, open and extensive manner in education, science, technology and innovation. Fortunately, in the case of the United Kingdom our objectives are congruent, which paves the way to fruitful long-term cooperation.

The European Union, in its Lisbon Strategy, considered that its main challenge for this century was “to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion”. Consistent with this strategy, most European countries, particularly the United Kingdom, have been implementing policies and actions aimed at creating an authentic knowledge society which will increase the economic competitiveness of countries, enterprises and individuals, contribute to social inclusion and cohesion, and facilitate the emergence of a new paradigm for development, for a green and creative economy, a for a truly sustainable model from both the environmental and social points of view.

Brazil has also been pursuing the implementation of this major strategic objective. We know perfectly well that if we want to consolidate our recent development we will have to make extraordinary efforts in order

to provide quality education for the whole of our population, from crèche to higher education, and also dramatically increase our capacity to innovate. We want to participate fully in the society of the future.

We know we have embarked on this journey towards the future, and sustainable development, from a starting point different from the one Europe currently enjoys.

In Brazil, facing this major 21st century challenge, the building of a knowledge society and of a new paradigm of sustainable and creative development must be combined with overcoming historical issues typical of the 20th century – eradicating poverty, reducing social inequalities, building adequate infrastructure, and above all, implementing a universal, high-quality public education system.

It is, without doubt, a monumental task – but the progress Brazil has achieved shows it is perfectly feasible.

Brazil currently combines counter-cyclical policies that enable moderate economic growth, income redistribution, and the stepping up of the fight to eradicate extreme poverty. Even after five years of world crisis we continue to enjoy macroeconomic stability, a reduced level of indebtedness, and inflation under control. Against the backdrop of increased structural demand for agricultural commodities we have become one of the world's major food producers. We have an integrated and diversified industry. We produce a great deal of soya, meat and ores but we also manufacture many cars, tractors and aeroplanes. 13 per cent of the world's fresh water is available to us and our biodiversity is the greatest in the world. We are world leaders in the production of renewable biomass energy and our energy matrix, based on hydroelectric power, is considerably cleaner than the world average. Furthermore, there are huge oil and gas deposits in our continental shelf, which will yield considerable resources to invest in our development. Democratic institutions and freedoms are fully in force, particularly those relative to freedom of speech and press. And Brazil currently plays the highest leadership role worldwide, including with regard to the environmental agenda and the implementation of a green, creative economy.

Our comparative advantages are, therefore, broad and diverse, and our potential for growth enormous. Nonetheless, as I stated in my speech when I took office as the Minister for Education, “I am fully persuaded that this potential will not be realised if we

Conventional Newtonian acceleration is not enough: we need quantum leaps

do not continue tackling our main frailty as a nation in a determined manner and as an absolute priority: the absence of universal quality education.”

That is why we have placed education, science, technology and innovation as the core strategic areas in our international cooperation. With the United Kingdom, a country recognised worldwide for the excellence of its teaching institutions, we want to have a profitable, concerted and long-term relation in the field of knowledge. However, this monumental endeavour simultaneously requires not only domestic effort but also international cooperation. Furthermore, it needs audacity and creativity.

That is why Brazil has been implementing audacious and innovative programmes and projects in the areas of education, science and technology, aimed at promoting true revolutions in the field of knowledge.

In relation to Brazilian higher education, for example, the University for All Programme – ‘ProUni’ – should be highlighted as it has become the largest and most successful scholarship programme in the history of our country, awarding to disadvantaged young people over a million scholarships for study at private universities. Equally, it is worth mentioning the creation of new federal universities (14 in total between 2003 and 2011) and the fantastic increase in registrations at federal higher education institutions, from 531 thousand in 2002 to over one million in 2010.

But the most inspiring programme for young people seeking a better future for themselves and their families is ‘Science without Borders’. This aims to award 100 thousand undergraduate, graduate and post-doctoral scholarships to the most outstanding Brazilian students, giving them the chance to improve their training at the very best universities in the world.

The programme represents a paradigm change in our international cooperation in the areas of education, science and technology, for in the past our scholarship programme for overseas study was quite restricted, concentrating almost entirely on PhD level.

Now, however, the scholarship award programme is much broader, seeking also to attract foreign researchers and lecturers who might wish to develop their research work in Brazil – from young doctoral students to senior researchers who have already reached the top in their field. We are privileged to have Professor Kurt Wüthrich, awarded the Nobel Prize in Chemistry in 2002, who from July this year will be developing his work in Brazil for three years. Our objective is not to export brains, as used to happen, but to attract talent and brains; to internationalise Brazilian science and transform our universities into institutions of international prestige.

As such, ‘Science without Borders’ is a programme that seeks to promote the consolidation, expansion and internationalisation of Brazilian science, technology

and competitiveness by means of exchanges and international mobility. The initiative is the result of a joint effort on the part of the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation (MCTI) and the Ministry of Education (MEC).

In the field of Brazilian international cooperation in education, therefore, the revolution – the quantum leap – is ‘Science without Borders’. Brazil wants to open up to the world, and that includes its science. It wishes to internationalise its talents and to attract talents from abroad to come and pursue research at its universities.

Despite the fact that it is a fairly recent programme (2011), it has already achieved huge success. We have had over 30 million web portal hits and we are on course to award 20 thousand study-abroad scholarships by September this year, at the time when 20 thousand young researchers will begin their professional development.

The target areas of the programme have been carefully selected in order to overcome the gridlocks and obstacles Brazil faces as it aims to increase exponentially its capacity to innovate and add value. In effect, despite having been ranked as high as 13th in the world in terms of generating basic research, Brazil is still lagging behind in terms of both patent production and industrial designs. That is why the programme areas are basically restricted to the field of exact sciences, engineering, technological areas and medical sciences. This programme has created immense expectations. There are thousands of young Brazilians who anxiously await an opportunity to study at the best universities in the world. They dream of studying at Cambridge, Oxford, and many other prestigious world-class British universities. We expect to see many of these dreams come true.

On our part we also have a reasonable expectation that young British talent will be willing to come to Brazil. They will find a country with huge potential that looks forward to welcoming them; a country that is advancing in swift steps towards sustainable development, noted for its vocation for peace and its authentic multiculturalism. We hope that, in the strategic field of education, we will have cooperation without borders with all nations that are willing to build a better world; one that is economically prosperous, socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable.

In the address I made as I took office at the Ministry of Education, I used a quote from the great writer G.K. Chesterton. He wrote: “Education is simply the soul of a society as it passes from one generation to another”.

Countries that elect to cooperate in the field of education without borders, therefore, will share not only the major strategic objective of building a better world based on the knowledge society with a new paradigm for development, but also their souls. We sincerely hope this will be the destiny of Brazil-United Kingdom bilateral relations. F