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FEATURED Q&A

How Is Access to Online Programs Affecting Education?

Q Earlier this year, the Carlos Slim Foundation and online education company Coursera announced they have entered a partnership aimed at increasing access to online educational content in Spanish and focused on job skills and employability. Is this a good model for developing human capital? How is access to online programs and tools changing the discussion about education reforms in the region?

A Nicolás Mariscal, member of the Advisor board and chairman of Grupo Marhnos in Mexico City: "Education is the best mechanism for combatting inequality and one of the main tools for development. In this sense, the initiative of the Carlos Slim Foundation contributes by making available online courses designed by top universities with content of high educational value and focused on developing in students the skills that the regional labor market requires. This is a great opportunity and it is recognized. However, the challenge requires a comprehensive approach that contributes to improving Internet access. According to the National Infrastructure Program (recently published by the federal government) only 39 percent of the Mexican population has Internet access. Between now and 2018, the government has set a goal of increasing the number of Internet users by 66.7 percent (increasing from 41 to 68 million users). Every Mexican without Internet access is at a

competitive disadvantage. Any educational system that bolsters the development and competitiveness of its population has to recognize and promote independent learning through tools, such as the Internet, that open the doors to a world without borders and beyond knowledge, provide spaces for participation. In the same vein, to the alliance with Coursera, the Carlos Slim Foundation adds platforms such as Telemex Hub and digital libraries, focused on creating spaces for innovation. It is worth evaluating the measurable results of

Continued on page 3



'Impatience' Growing With Venezuela's Government: Kerry

Countries in the Western Hemisphere are growing more impatient with Venezuela's government over the stalled talks aimed at ending the country's political crisis, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry said Wednesday in Mexico City. See story on page 2.

Photo: U.S. State Department.

Inside This Issue

FEATURED Q&A: How Is Access to Online Programs Affecting Education?	1	Dominican Republic's Senate Approves Citizenship Legislation.....	2
'Impatience' Growing With Venezuela Over Stalled Talks: Kerry	2	Mexico's Central Bank Cuts Forecast for GDP Growth.....	2
Cuban Government Blocks Dissident Blogger's Online Newspaper	2	Brazilian Court Rules Against Banks in Interest Case	3

NEWS BRIEFS

Dominican Republic's Senate Approves Citizenship Legislation

The Dominican Republic's Senate has approved a bill, already passed by the lower house, that will create a system to grant citizenship to children born to immigrants, BBC News reported today. The measure will create categories for people depending on their place of birth and if they have documents showing they were born in the Dominican Republic. The highest court in the Dominican Republic had ruled last year that children of undocumented immigrants were not automatically citizens, creating tension with neighboring Haiti and drawing international criticism.

Mexico's Central Bank Cuts Forecast for GDP Growth

Mexican officials expect weaker growth in 2014 than previously forecast, with the central bank lowering its estimate of GDP growth this year to a range of 2.3 percent to 3.3 percent, down from the earlier forecast of 3 percent to 4 percent, Bloomberg News reported Wednesday. The bank's quarterly inflation report cited slow growth in the United States, the main destination of Mexico's exports, and low consumer spending.

Mexico's Cemex Considering New Bond Offerings: CFO

Cement maker **Cemex** is considering the offering of new bonds as part of its efforts to lower interest costs, extend maturities on debt and regain its investment grade rating, the company's new chief financial officer told Bloomberg News Wednesday in an interview. "We're watching the rates, the liquidity of the markets and we're prepared to take advantage of the changes," said José Antonio González.

Political News**'Impatience' Growing With Venezuela Over Stalled Talks: Kerry**

The United States and other countries in the Western Hemisphere are growing more impatient with Venezuela's government over its stalled talks with the opposition amid the country's political crisis, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry said Wednesday in Mexico City. Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro's government

“So we are witnessing an impatience that is growing in the neighborhood, and we consider ourselves to part of the neighborhood.”

— John Kerry

and opposition leaders had been engaged in dialogue aimed at ending three months of violent anti-government protests that have left at least 42 people dead. However, the opposition pulled out of the talks last week, complaining that Maduro's government was failing to respond to the opposition's proposals and was continuing its crackdown against demonstrators. "Regrettably, there has just been a total failure by the government of Venezuela to demonstrate good-faith actions to implement those things that they agreed to do approximately a month ago," Kerry told reporters alongside Mexican Foreign Secretary José Antonio Meade. "And so we believe that what is important for the Venezuelan government now [is] to honor the dialogue process and to restore the civil liberties of opposition leaders who have been unjustly imprisoned and to protect the human rights of those who were simply trying to exercise their democratic right to express dissent." Kerry said that the United States is not involved in any negotiations in Venezuela, except for its encouragement of mediators, which include the foreign ministers of Brazil, Colombia and Ecuador, as well as

the Vatican. The United States is "prepared to have a normal relationship" with Venezuela, but frustration is growing, said Kerry. "So we are witnessing an impatience that is growing in the neighborhood, and we consider ourselves to part of the neighborhood," said Kerry. "We have great concern about the instability that is created as a result of what is happening in Venezuela." Kerry expressed hopes that sanctions against Venezuela's government that are under debate in the U.S. Congress would be unnecessary, adding that "all options remain on the table at this time." On Tuesday, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee approved legislation that would impose sanctions against Venezuelan government officials accused of committing human rights abuses during the protests. The full Senate could vote on it within weeks. Earlier this month, the House Foreign Affairs Committee approved its version of the legislation, sending it to the House chamber. In addition to meeting Wednesday with Meade, Kerry met with Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto to discuss bilateral issues including trade, security and education.

Cuban Government Blocks Dissident Blogger's Online Newspaper

Cuba's government on Wednesday blocked the new online newspaper of dissident blogger Yoani Sánchez just hours after it went live, BBC News reported.

Sánchez had said her Web site, 14ymedio.com, would provide news about the country and would not be a platform against its communist government. However, Web users in Cuba who tried to access the site were instead



directed to a site called "yoani\$landia," which accuses Sánchez of being obsessed with money. The people behind the Web site are believed to be officials of the Cuban government, BBC News reported. The government of President Raúl Castro has eased some restrictions on dissidents,

File Photo: Generación Y.

including allowing Sánchez and others to travel abroad. However, the country's media remains under strict government control.

Economic News

Brazilian Court Rules Against Banks in Interest Case

Brazil's Superior Court of Justice on Wednesday ruled against the country's banks in a case involving the amount of delinquent interest that can be charged in class-action lawsuits, Bloomberg News reported. In its ruling, the court said interest must be calculated beginning when plaintiffs file the class-action suits, rather than when each plaintiff requests payment. The ruling could cost **Banco do Brasil**, **Itaú Unibanco Holding** and other banks as much as 341.5 billion reais (\$154.6 billion) in another lawsuit, said the central bank's attorney general, Isaac Ferreira. In that case, depositors filed lawsuits against banks for losses that they incurred in their savings accounts related to government policies aimed at fighting hyperinflation during the 1980s and 1990s. A ruling in that case is expected from Brazil's Supreme Federal Tribunal on May 28. "This is very negative for the banks and the financial system as a whole," João Pedro Brugger of **Leme Investimentos** in Florianópolis, Brazil, told Bloomberg News in a telephone interview. The ruling took a toll on the shares of Brazilian banks. Banco do Brasil's shares fell 7.3 percent to 22.01 reais Wednesday in São Paulo, their largest one-day drop since April 2009. Itaú's shares tumbled 2.1 percent. The central bank plans to review the ruling to determine what appeal could be filed, said Erasto Carvalho, a central bank attorney. The judges of the Superior Court of Justice signaled that banks might be allowed to pay depositors in installments in order to avoid harm to the financial system, he said. "Each bank will have to make its own calculation for now," Carvalho said in an interview with reporters in Brasília. In February, Britain's **HSBC Holdings** said its unit in Brazil might have to pay as much as \$600 million in the event of a ruling against the banks.

Featured Q&A

Continued from page 1

the foundation's program in order to raise awareness of their impact."

Ariel Fiszbein, director of the education program (PREAL) at the Inter-American Dialogue: "The development and adoption of new information and communication technologies creates opportunities to modernize the provision of education and training services around the world. Countries in Latin America face deep challenges when it comes to workforce development issues. In particular, preparing young people to be productive and creative workers and entrepreneurs in an increasingly competitive global economy demands not only better schools—a major challenge for all countries in the region—but also a more diversified and relevant supply of higher education and technical and professional training. Fast-expanding access to online services makes distance learning an attractive option. There is growing experience with content development and delivery that does not rely exclusively on face-to-face interaction. Indeed, technology challenges well-established practices of how to run training and education programs for adults. However, to fully materialize the potential of new technologies education policies will also need to adapt. Education systems will need to become more open to innovation and experimentation. Private entrepreneurs will need to be given the space to innovate and face a level playing field in the provision of services. Large, traditional educational institutions will need to be challenged to feel the competitive pressure from new providers. Public policies will need to adapt and learn how to develop and apply regulatory frameworks that protect users of services without unduly stifling creativity and innovation in the market for training and post-secondary education. Education authorities in most countries are currently not well prepared to play such a role. Significant institutional change will be required and is likely to be a long and controversial process."

A Tel Amiel, researcher at the Nucleus of Informatics Applied to Education at the Universidade Estadual de Campinas and coordinator of the **Educação Aberta** working group: "Making quality educational resources more accessible is always positive. Though I can't speak to the outcomes of this specific project, the simple translation or subtitling of content is generally seen as the most expedient, but perhaps not the most effective, way to make content available. The translation and subtitling of the resources of well-known initiatives is not a novel move (MIT-OCW and Khan Academy are a couple of

“There is a sense that simply providing the resources will lead to wide access and use, but that is rarely the case.”

— Tel Amiel

examples). One should consider though that adaptation is important—content is not context-free and cannot be designed to 'speak' to every learning context. Moreover, there is a sense that simply providing the resources will lead to wide access and use, but that is rarely the case due to local constraints (devices, bandwidth and skills, among others). Concerns with adaptation and mediation could be mitigated if the materials were Open Educational Resources (OER), openly licensed content in open/standard formats, so that local actors might adapt, modify, remix and incorporate them into other works. Unfortunately, this is not within the terms of use of Coursera. Still, this partnership appears to aim at the production of novel resources and courses as well as foster reasonable conditions to access these resources through local centers, which is a positive move. Moreover, investment in translation or subtitling

Continued on page 4

Featured Q&A*Continued from page 3*

could otherwise be used to build local capacity for the creation of content (related to the OER competencies above). These activities could be the kind of 'human capacity' and employability skills that programs like these aims to develop. Partnership and cooperation with organizations like Coursera could still follow."

A Gabriel Sánchez Zinny, president of Kuepa.com: "The growth of new education technologies is a response to one of the most pressing human capital challenges: the gap between school and the labor market. This gap has meant that while youth are facing high unemployment rates, with a troubling rise in 'Ni-Nis (youth neither in school nor at work), many businesses are unable to fill positions due to a lack of qualified applicants.

“A growing young workforce is clamoring for more and better education, which the traditional system can't deliver.”

— Gabriel Sánchez Zinny

Surveys of the private sector, like those done by the Mexican think tank Center for Research on Development (CIDAC), show that private firms struggle to find enough qualified applicants. This is not surprising, as the World Bank points out that barely 20 percent of adults in the region have any university education, not to mention that less than half finish secondary school. At the same time, a growing young workforce is clamoring for more and better education, which the traditional system can't deliver. Innovative partnership models can help address these pressures by boosting both access to and quality of education. Online coursework can better reach the most isolated and marginalized students, lowering costs and making geography and traditional infrastructure largely irrelevant. MOOCs,

or massive open online courses, can reach millions without the need for so much as a single dormitory and serve as platforms for lifelong learning. Thus, online options are well-positioned to reshape education more fundamentally. And better collaboration between education providers and private-sector leaders is particularly welcome given that the two sectors have rarely communicated their needs to one another."

A Michael Trucano, senior ICT and education policy specialist at the World Bank: "In many countries across the region, there is a tenuous link between what is learned, and taught, within formal education institutions and the types of skills, knowledge and attitudes desired by employers. Increased access to information and communications technology—to cheaper devices, to connectivity—means that the potential to provide more flexible learning opportunities for people as they seek to develop more immediately market-relevant skills and knowledge has greatly increased in the past few years. New initiatives sponsored by many groups offer the potential to take advantage of the increased connectivity of youth and adults across Latin America to help make the sorts of connections that are, for a number of reasons, difficult to make if we assume 'business as usual.' It is important to note the use of the word 'potential' here, though. We still have a long way to go in our understanding of what works and what doesn't. Having the technical infrastructure to go online, and having relevant educational content online, are necessary but not sufficient prerequisites for change, let alone 'success.' We do know that those who are best equipped to take advantage of these sorts of opportunities are typically those already advantaged in many ways—by level of education, by income and economic class, by proximity to major urban centers. We need to explore different business models and approaches to better connect those who have jobs to offer and those who need them. Innovative uses of ICTs will have to be at the heart of many such efforts."

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