

By Elaina Loveland

## Championing Global Competence

An interview with Asia Society President and CEO  
Vishakha Desai

**V**ISHAKHA DESAI IS THE SIXTH PRESIDENT AND CEO OF ASIA SOCIETY, a leading global organization committed to strengthening partnerships among the people, leaders, and institutions of Asia and the United States. Founded by John D. Rockefeller III in 1956, Asia Society is the premier organization with a unique focus on three-dimensional engagement—combining culture, commerce, and current affairs—with more than 35 countries in Asia. Appointed president in 2004, Desai sets the direction for the Society’s diverse programs ranging from major U.S.-Asia policy initiatives and national educational partnerships for global learning to path-breaking art exhibitions and innovative Asian American performances.

As scholar of Asian art, Desai has published and edited several books and numerous articles on traditional and contemporary art. Under her leadership, Asia Society has expanded the scope and scale of its activities, including the opening of new offices in India and Korea, the inauguration of a new center on U.S.-China relations, and the development of new initiatives focusing on the environment, on Asian women leaders, and on partnerships among the next generation of exceptional leaders in Asia and the United States.

Desai has taught at the University of Massachusetts, Boston University, Columbia University, and Williams College.

**IE:** *The Asia Society supports global competence in education. How do you define global competence?*

**DESAI:** Global competence starts with the capacity to investigate and connect to the world: that is, to be aware of and interested in the world and its workings. Students first demonstrate global competence when they can identify an issue of global significance and frame inquiries that yield deep understanding. They locate and weigh relevant information from local and international sources in English and other languages as they become proficient. They examine and synthesize information to produce a cohesive response—an insightful product, interpretation, or account of the issue under study.

Another requirement for global competence is the ability to recognize and weigh perspectives. Students demonstrate global competence when they recognize their own worldviews as well as others’ are shaped by cultural, religious, economic, or historical forces. They are aware of geopolitical inequities and understand that “negotiating” perspectives may or may not change one’s views but nearly always deepens understanding.

As in so many areas of life, an aptitude for communicating ideas is essential. Global competence entails effective communication—both verbal and non-verbal—with diverse audiences. Modes of communication must be adjusted to reach different groups, since audiences differ on the basis of culture, location, faith, politics, socioeconomic status, and other variables. Globally competent students are proficient in English (the world’s common language for commerce and communication) and at least one other language. They are also skilled users of media and technology within a global communications environment.

Global competence calls for students to *take action*. Globally competent students see themselves as being capable of making a difference and being aware of opportunities to do so. They’re able to weigh options based on evidence and insight, assess potential for impact, consider possible consequences for others, act whether individually or in groups, and reflect on those actions.



Vishakha Desai

In all of these steps toward global competence, students acquire and apply disciplinary and interdisciplinary knowledge, expertise, and skills. Simply put, content knowledge is the foundation of global competence. Students learn to think like scientists, mathematicians, historians, and artists by using the tools and methods of inquiry in each of the disciplines as they address issues of global significance.

For Asia Society, the rising importance of the Asian region in world affairs makes it imperative that global competence take into account serious knowledge about Asia.

**IE: How did the Asia Society's Partnership for Global Learning begin? What is its vision, and have there been any monumental successes thus far?**

**DESAI:** The mission of Asia Society is to deepen connections and build partnerships among Asians and Americans—this has become more urgent than ever before in this global environment. Therefore, our vi-

sion for students is that all will graduate from high school ready for college and competent to compete, communicate, and cooperate in a global environment. To reach this vision, Asia Society formed the Partnership for Global Learning in 2008 with the support of the MetLife Foundation. A membership network created to support a national movement of all K–12 stakeholders—educators, policymakers, universities, parents, and individuals—the Partnership is working to develop students who are prepared for work and citizenship in the global twenty-first century. The Partnership provides opportunities for educators to share best practices, resources, and models to stimulate new approaches through annual conferences, monthly e-newsletters, and collaborative-learning activities. Over our two years, for example, we have held two very successful conferences bringing together over 500 people at each to learn from each other and national experts. The Partnership also provides resources including curriculum products and tools, online programming, and professional development. It fosters collaborations between educators in the United States, Asia, and throughout the world to share best practices. The Partnership also

seeks to inform public policy to support global competence as a key objective of U.S. education.

**IE: How does the integration of international perspectives in K–12 education contribute to internationalizing higher education as well? Why is internationalization important at both K–12 and postsecondary levels?**

**DESAI:** Internationalizing higher education is already well on its way in many colleges and universities, and the reasons for doing so are the same as they are for K–12 education. We need well-trained, globally savvy people who can be successful in an increasingly interconnected world economy. This is especially apparent if you look at Asia, which already accounts for 27 percent of total U.S. jobs from exports. U.S. exports to the Asia-Pacific region have increased by 63 percent during the past five years and the International Monetary Fund forecasts that the Asia-Pacific economies will grow faster than the world average through at least 2014.

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“**Students demonstrate global competence when they recognize their own worldviews as well as others’ are shaped by cultural, religious, economic, or historical forces.**”

We also need people who speak the world’s languages and understand its cultures to ensure peaceful coexistence and reduce the threat of conflict that often comes from misunderstanding. And we need people that through their study and appreciation of the world’s cultures are better equipped to interact productively with an increasingly diverse population here in the United States.

If we can do a good job in integrating global perspectives in K–12 schools and graduating high school students with the foundations of global competence, then obviously those students will bring their international knowledge and “global mindedness” to their university studies, and to the culture of the college community. This in turn will allow them to be successful in the job markets of the twenty-first century.

**IE: The Asia Society’s International Studies Schools Network has 23 schools that are aiming to develop globally competent, college-ready high school students. How did the International Studies Schools Network start and what are some of its greatest success stories?**

**DESAI:** With an initial grant of \$7.5 million from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Asia Society in 2003 launched the International Studies Schools Network (ISSN). The ISSN is the first-ever national initiative to create a network of small, college preparatory secondary schools aimed at ensuring every student graduates college and career ready and globally competent. The Network started by opening three schools in the fall of 2004, but now consists of 23 schools clustered in 6 states: California, Colorado, Illinois, New York, North Carolina, and Texas. Across the Network, the ISSN serves students who are 80 percent minority and 63 percent low income.

The ISSN was initiated to address two critical problems. First, the persistent problems of poor achievement and high dropout and meager college-going rates among low income and minority students. Second, American public schools do not deliberately and effectively seek to develop deep knowledge of the world’s cultures, languages, and systems, or the intellectual and social habits of mind and skills their students will need to be economically competitive in the global economy. The guiding rationale of the ISSN is the belief that addressing these issues by engaging students in examination, analysis, and solution of real issues in their communities and in communities across the globe is an effective way to address the problems of poor school performance and to develop students’ deep understanding of the world and how it works. And to ensure that students can communicate what they learn in a global context, every student has the opportunity to study an Asian language, and often other world languages.



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There is no country in the world today more important to the prosperity and stability of the United States than China, and no language more important for American students to learn than Chinese.

**IE: Why does the Asia Society emphasize Chinese Language Initiatives?**

**DESAI:** In order to prepare for the challenges and take full advantage of the opportunities offered by an increasingly global future, it has never been more important for U.S. students to be globally competent and proficient in multiple languages. There is no country in the world today more important to the prosperity and stability of the United States than China, and no language more important for American students to learn than Chinese.

A 2007 report from the National Bureau of Economic Research forecasts that by 2040, China's GDP will be larger than that of the entire rest of the world, and that the Chinese market will be larger than those of the United States, the European Union, Japan, and India combined. Mandarin Chinese is spoken by more people than any other language in the world and has a continuous written history going back almost 4,000 years. In addition, the learning of Chinese characters involves cognitive skills—visual, graphic, and pattern recognition—that are not central to the learning of alphabetic or syllabic writing systems. There is evidence to suggest that success in learning Chinese can translate into success in other core academic subject areas.

Although there are currently no completely reliable data on the growth of Chinese language programs, *Asia Society's Chinese in 2008: An Expanding Field* report includes anecdotal evidence that there was a 200 percent increase in the number of Chinese language programs in the United States from 2005 to 2008, and this growth is only increasing in intensity. This unprecedented expansion is not coming from a single driver but from multiple sources, and many municipal and state governments are moving forward fast, recognizing the study of Chinese language and culture as an economic competitiveness strategy and a way to develop the global competence of their future workforce. [See the Special Section on China in this issue beginning on page 39.]

**IE: Why is increasing foreign language proficiency of many languages important, and what can schools and universities do to boost foreign language learning?**

**DESAI:** English is a commercial lingua franca in many parts of the world, but English alone is no longer sufficient for a global professional who must compete and collaborate in a global economic environment. This is especially true when Asia, a large and rapidly growing part of the world's economy, is taken into account. Of particular importance, given the enormous significance of China, is the opportunity to learn Mandarin Chinese, the most widely spoken language in the world but one that has not been traditionally taught

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in U.S. schools. The need for Americans who can communicate in a second language and operate within another cultural frame of reference is especially evident for future professionals in science, agriculture, law enforcement, health care, and engineering. National security concerns have also prompted an increased focus on the need for proficient speakers of a wider range of world languages beyond what our schools have traditionally offered. Additionally, language learning is a vehicle for learning about other cultures and enhancing cross-cultural communication, an increasingly important skill as U.S. society becomes ever more diverse.

**IE: What are the greatest challenges that colleges and universities in the United States face in today's global age?**

**DESAI:** The profound economic and technological changes of the past 20 years are well-known. Less well-known are the equally dramatic changes in education worldwide. There has been a rapid expansion in secondary education, considered by many policymakers to be the minimum necessary to participate in the knowledge economy. So, for example, while the United States used to be far ahead of other countries in the rates of student graduation from high school, in recent years other countries such as Japan and South Korea, have been catching up and even surpassing the United States. Similarly, an enormous expansion of higher education is taking

place in many parts of the world. In the United States, only 54 percent of those who enter college complete a degree, compared with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average of 71 percent and Japan's impressive 91 percent.<sup>1</sup>

All this is creating a fundamental shift in the supply of global skills. At the same time, increased productivity from technology and global migration of lower skilled jobs means that in advanced economies, the growing demand is for "nonroutine analytical and interactive jobs." These jobs require the ability to innovate, to use technology, and to function in a globalized environment: a far different skill set than schools have produced in the past. We must therefore increase the number of college graduates in this country and ensure that they are prepared with the skills to meet this challenge.

**IE: How can these challenges be overcome?**

**DESAI:** Clearly one approach to overcoming the challenges of a global age faced by higher education institutions is to respond to them effectively before students get to college. Our focus at Asia Society has been on K-12 education and all of our work, in one way or another, is about creating greater opportunities for students to become more globally competent. That includes the ISSN, the Chi-

<sup>1</sup> Andreas Schleicher and Vivien Stewart, "Learning from World-Class Schools," *Educational Leadership* 66 no. 2 (2008).

## What kind of education advances global competence?

Anthony Jackson, Asia Society's vice president for education responds:

**L**ET ME GIVE YOU AN EXAMPLE of a school that is leading the charge in preparing globally competent students. The International School of the Americas (ISA) is a small, autonomous school located on the grounds of a large, comprehensive high school in San Antonio, Texas. The school has received the Goldman Sachs Prize for Excellence in International Education and is one of two "anchor schools" in Asia Society's International Studies Schools Network. Its student body, which is chosen by lottery from San Antonio's middle schools, is made up of more than half minority students.

Originally founded as a professional development school for Trinity University with a focus on helping young

people to develop the knowledge and skills needed for international jobs, the school's mission has since significantly broadened. Today the school seeks to produce students who are truly "global citizens." Hands-on projects and simulations invigorate the learning process and form the centerpiece of the school's global studies mission. A large Model UN program; partnerships with the Heifer Ranch in Arkansas to teach about world hunger; a week-long school trip to explore Mexican culture; and community service requirements and career exploration internships with internationally oriented organizations all supplement the classroom curriculum which is global in nature.

In addition to the focus on Latin America, the school maintains a ten-

year partnership with a sister school in Japan. Every other year, students from ISA journey to Japan for two to three weeks and students from Japan visit ISA in return. This summer will be their sixth trip. (For more information: <http://sites.google.com/site/japanesexchange/>.) Using state-of-the-art videoconferencing facilities, students at the two schools have also shared research methods and data and completed shared projects. ISA is also a member of the Asia Society-Han Ban Confucius Classrooms Network and will be visiting their sister school in China this summer. The school has a zero percent dropout rate and roughly 97 percent of students matriculate to postsecondary education.



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nese Language Initiatives, our work to promote global competence in afterschool and extended learning opportunities, an enormous range of teaching resources on Asia at our Web site, [www.AsiaSociety.org/Education](http://www.AsiaSociety.org/Education), and through our print and digital publications. [Details on some key ISSN initiatives can be found on page 23 of this issue of *IE* in “Opening Young Eyes.”]

**IE:** *Why should institutions in the United States educate students about their counterparts in Asia? How can U.S. institutions and Asian institutions work together to foster greater intercultural understanding? Why is this vital to U.S.–Asia relations in the twenty-first century?*

**DESAI:** Asia Society has led delegations of U.S. education leaders to China and India and, in 2006, organized the *Asia Pacific Forum on Education* in Beijing, bringing together leaders from across the region to discuss the challenges of globalization to education. Following on this, in 2008, Asia Society convened *New Skills for a Global Innovation Society: Asia Pacific Forum on Secondary Education* in New Delhi, to draw on best practices and frame educational options for leaders in India as they embark on a massive expansion of secondary education. Asia Society is also the convener of Asia 21, an active network of emerging leaders in Asia and the United States created to build relationships and engage in interdisciplinary dialogue and cultural exchange and to develop cooperative responses for shared challenges.

Obviously this is something we prioritize, and as I said, we have built on this experience to create *Learning With the World*, a new initiative from the Asia Society Partnership for Global Learning meant to focus on international best practice and common issues of concern in education. “Learning With the World” will convene the world’s thought leaders in education to foster focused, generative communication among them, and to catalyze improvement of education systems through the sharing and adaptation of best practices.

The first event of the Learning With the World series, the symposium “International Perspectives on U.S. Education Policy and Practice: What Can We Learn from High Performing Nations?” took place in Washington, D.C. on April 27–28, 2010. International experts from Australia, Canada, China, Finland, Singapore, and the United Kingdom shared the experience of their countries in upgrading their education systems and their future plans for providing students with a world-class education. The discussions focused in on three key areas: student assessment, teacher and leader effectiveness, and innovations to impact school improvement and equity. Surprisingly, many of the international participants stated that when they were looking for ideas with which to upgrade their own educational systems, they turned to the United States for ideas.

It is dialogue like this that will assist the United States and other countries in producing transformative ideas, strategies, and options to address specific critical issues of common concern in education worldwide.

**IE**

**ELAINA LOVELAND** is managing editor of *IE*.