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## Make global skills a top priority

Harvard University recently released the groundbreaking report of its first big review of the undergraduate curriculum in almost 30 years. The study concludes that in a fast-changing world, students urgently need knowledge of a wider range of subjects, deeper understanding of the principles of science and a far greater grasp of international affairs. It recommends significant reforms of the undergraduate curriculum to ensure greater international knowledge and experience and stronger foreign language skills for graduates who will be “globally competent”. They need to be able to appreciate other cultures and to work expertly in other countries or as part of an international team.

The central question the Harvard committee sought to answer - “What does it mean to be an educated person in the first quarter of the 21st century?” - is not one for elite institutions alone. Education systems across the board urgently need to be modernised.

There are four main reasons for this, all linked to globalisation’s relentless progress. First, a global marketplace demands an internationally competent workforce. Already, one in six US jobs is tied to international trade. US trade with Asia has exceeded that with Europe since 1979 and now amounts to more than \$800bn a year. Growth for industries of all sizes will mostly be found in overseas markets and access to good jobs will require new skills. Careers in business, government, healthcare, law enforcement and a wide variety of other jobs will in future demand broad global knowledge.

Second, dealing with the biggest emerging threats to peace and stability - such as terrorism, poverty, HIV/Aids and environmental degradation - will require increased knowledge of other world regions, cultures and languages.

Third, increased diversity in classrooms, workplaces and communities - including new immigrants from Asia and Latin America - calls for greater understanding of the myriad cultures that students bring to school.

Last, if people are to exercise effective citizenship in a democratic society in the 21st century, they will have to be knowledgeable about global issues. Surveys conducted by the Asia Society show a huge gap between the growing importance of Asia and other world regions to America’s economic prosperity and national security and most students’ knowledge of the world. Twenty-five per cent of college-bound high school students cannot name the ocean between California and Asia. Eighty per cent do not know that India is the world’s largest democracy.

Teachers are ill prepared to meet this challenge. Teacher training programmes are among the least internationalised of all those offered by universities. Most prospective teachers do not take any international courses. Participation rates in overseas study programmes are very low.

Compounding this is the fact that language instruction does not reflect today's realities. For example, more than 1m US students a year study French, a language spoken by 80m people worldwide. Fewer than 40,000 study Chinese, a language spoken by 1.3bn people.

The key to closing this critical international knowledge gap is leadership from a range of sectors.

At a state level, governors must recognise that it is in their interest to tackle the problem. As states seek to position themselves for success in the global economy, governors and state education leaders should incorporate knowledge of other world cultures and global affairs into education standards, assessments and teacher preparation requirements.

Business leaders should ask policymakers to emphasise the importance of international knowledge and help schools to develop innovative programmes through study and exchange. Media companies can have a powerful influence in engaging young people in international affairs. Technology companies can link American schools to schools in other countries and help build international knowledge through online courses.

The federal Departments of State, Defense, Education and Commerce should work together to create effective elementary and secondary school pipelines in the main world languages, especially in shortage areas such as Chinese, Hindi, and Arabic. Universities should rethink their teacher training programmes to ensure that all new teachers know the international dimensions of the subjects they will teach. Parents too, ought to participate, insisting that international and language studies be treated not as a frill but as a core part of education.

To tackle the challenges of globalisation will require a serious commitment to making international knowledge and skills a policy priority. In the past, complex international transactions were the domain of diplomats and international policy and business experts. Today a converging set of powerful economic, technological, demographic and geopolitical trends will demand that all citizens, not just the elite, have that kind of global fluency. Knowledge of the world is no longer a luxury, it is a necessity.

The writer is president of the Asia Society.