



Australia Vietnam  
Policy Institute



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# Australia Vietnam Policy Institute (AVPI) Perth Roundtable Summary Paper

**What a Comprehensive Strategic  
Partnership between Australia and  
Vietnam Could Achieve: Enhancing  
Education Links**



Australian Government  
Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade



**The Australia Vietnam Policy Institute (AVPI) Perth Roundtable on 24 October 2023 was hosted in collaboration with AVPI Knowledge Partner, Perth USAsia Centre, as part of the AVPI's second roundtable series.**

The discussion focused on the future potential of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) between Australia and Vietnam, following announcements from both Governments during the 50th anniversary year of diplomatic relations in 2023 of the intention to elevate the strategic partnership to the highest level. Moderated by Jennifer Howell, Pro Vice-Chancellor, Global Engagement at The University of Western Australia, the roundtable brought together 19 participants from education, government, and industry to discuss the future potential of a CSP and the role of education in enhancing connections between Australia and Vietnam.

Professor Alec Cameron, Vice-Chancellor and President of RMIT University, was the key speaker for this event, presenting RMIT Vietnam's 23-year journey as a case study for a successful education venture between the two countries. Roundtable participants shared valuable perspectives on the significance of international education in helping build cross-cultural bridges, knowledge exchange, and contributed ideas on how to better leverage graduates with bicultural competency.

This summary paper highlights the experiences and priorities of the roundtable participants and the education sector in Western Australia. The key themes and emerging insights from the discussion are presented here with the aim to provide industry inputs into the development of the CSP and create discussion amongst industry and government on the opportunities and challenges that exist in the Australia Vietnam bilateral relationship.

## **Australia Vietnam Enhanced Economic Engagement Grant (AVEG) Round 2 Roundtable Series**

AVPI roundtables in 2023/2024 are being completed under the second iteration of the AVEG Program, supported by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). Building on the successful Australia-Vietnam Business Champions roundtable series in 2022, the second AVPI roundtable series will explore new Australia and Vietnam locations and new key sectors, as identified in the Australia Vietnam Enhanced Economic Engagement Strategy (EEES). These engagements will ensure strong national voices on the challenges and opportunities across sectors that are key to both countries economic development and sustainable futures.

## **Australia Vietnam Policy Institute (AVPI)**

The AVPI is the first policy institute focused on Australia's relationship with Vietnam, acting as a partnered public policy hub centred around engagement, collaboration, and impact. The AVPI enables and facilitates discussions on strategic and economic issues in the Australia-Vietnam bilateral relationship. Through disseminating the latest research, identifying upcoming trends, and sharing practical insights from people with on-the-ground experience, the AVPI helps to advance a cooperative and secure environment for two-way trade and investment.

# What a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between Australia and Vietnam Could Achieve: Enhancing Education Links



- Education initiatives between Australia and Vietnam, including Transnational Education (TNE), are core to strengthening bilateral relations and achieving joint economic ambitions.
- Collaborative partnerships in education contribute to sustainability and local development by promoting socio-ecological transitions, engaging with local communities, and aligning with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- While educational programs like the New Colombo Plan foster global citizenship and cultural understanding, there's a need to address the disparity in student exchange numbers and Australian outbound student mobility to leverage education for stronger geopolitical ties.
- In an effort to extend influence and deepen bilateral ties, Australian education providers are expanding their presence in Vietnam, offering blended educational experiences and an opportunity for enhanced integration and interchange.
- The facilitation of TNE between Australia and Vietnam is recognised as a means to bolster employability and global competence, preparing graduates for a globalised job market and addressing employability concerns in Vietnam.
- The reciprocal recognition of accreditation between Australian and Vietnamese higher education institutions is crucial for enhancing the value and mobility of graduates and professional transitions.





In the 50 years of Australia's diplomatic relations with Vietnam, education linkages have emerged as a significant force in fostering mutual understanding and cooperation.

The AVPI Perth Roundtable brought together a community of leaders focused on exploring how we can build on the previous 50 years and create future education opportunities that will continue to drive positive outcomes for both countries.

Transnational education (TNE) initiatives have been instrumental, with over 20,000 Vietnamese students attaining Australian qualifications in Vietnam across several institutions since diplomatic relations commenced.

According to a press release from the Australian Embassy in Vietnam, an estimated 80,000 Vietnamese alumni working in Vietnam have affiliations with Australian education institutions and embody the educational bridge between the two nations.<sup>1</sup>

Gathering experts and participants from education, government and industry, the roundtable discussion explored the broader impact of these educational ties, as well as the potential for bilateral education initiatives to contribute to solving critical global issues like the green economy, soft power, and the future

of work. Intentional and strategic engagement in the education sector was also discussed as paramount for Australia's sustained influence throughout Southeast Asia. In this context, enhancing educational ties in Vietnam sets a precedent for regional leadership and collaborative progress.

The Australia-Vietnam Enhanced Economic Engagement Strategy (EEES) identifies education and innovation as crucial pillars for strengthening bilateral relations and achieving joint economic ambitions.<sup>2</sup> The growing importance of the role of education is increasingly recognised as a conduit for comprehensive geopolitical cooperation. Through these educational ties, the relationship between these nations continues to evolve, aligning with both nations' aspirations towards sustainable development and greater geopolitical engagement.

The alliance between Australia and Vietnam is a striking example of how education can extend beyond lecture halls to shape international relations. As such, educational links between the two nations through collaborative research, student exchange or shared initiatives will form a core aspect of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP).

1. Australia Trade and Investment Commission, "Australia-Vietnam Education Partnerships 2023", Austrade - Australian Government, accessed 12 November 2023, <https://vietnam.embassy.gov.au/hnoi/MR230522.html>.

2. Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, "Australia-Vietnam Enhanced Economic Engagement Strategy", Australian Government, (2021).



# RMIT Vietnam

The Roundtable welcomed Professor Alec Cameron, Vice-Chancellor and President, RMIT University to discuss RMIT Vietnam's successful journey in building education bridges across the bilateral relationship.

Over the past 23 years, RMIT's journey in Vietnam has flourished. It has a vibrant community of 12,000 current students across three locations, and its 20,000 alumni members have actively contributed to developing 6,000 enterprises in 18 different industries.<sup>3</sup>

RMIT became the first wholly foreign-owned university in Vietnam and is one of the longstanding examples of the education connections between Australia and Vietnam. It officially opened to students in 2001 in Ho Chi Minh City, expanded its campus to Hanoi in 2004, and also established an English language centre in Danang in 2018. RMIT Vietnam enables Vietnamese students to access international education locally, with degrees recognised by the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training.<sup>4</sup>



As the first institution to deliver international degrees in Vietnam, RMIT Vietnam took on a considerable project in a country perceived by some as risky, demonstrating a commitment to fostering education in Vietnam.<sup>5</sup>

RMIT Vietnam's approach to establishing itself in Vietnam exhibits a long-term commitment and deep understanding of regional dynamics. The RMIT Vietnam Country Commitment<sup>6</sup> outlines the institution's strategic direction and highlights its pledge to contribute to Vietnam. RMIT Vietnam has sought to align its educational offerings and strategic directions with Vietnam's economic and social needs, focusing on areas like emerging technologies, smart and sustainable cities, social innovation and regional collaboration, reflecting an awareness of the country's developmental trajectory and regional trends.

More recently, RMIT University's commitment to Vietnam was further underlined by the announcement of a strategic investment fund seeking to reinvest its profits into Vietnam.

3. RMIT Vietnam, "RMIT Alumni in SGS Campus Celebrates 20th Anniversary," RMIT, accessed 12 November, 2023, <https://www.rmit.edu.vn/news/all-news/2022/nov/rmit-alumni-in-sgs-campus-celebrate-20th-anniversary>.
4. RMIT, "Facts and Figures," RMIT, accessed 12 November, 2023, <https://www.rmit.edu.au/about/facts-figures>.
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6. RMIT Vietnam, "Vietnam Country Commitment." RMIT Vietnam, accessed on 29 January, 2024, <https://www.rmit.edu.vn/about-us/who-we-are/our-commitments/vietnam-country-commitment>.

## The road to sustainability

**Roundtable participants shared their practical wisdom on the principles required to establish a successful education venture in Vietnam. Embedding financial and relational sustainability from the get-go was discussed as a prerequisite for success.**

The roundtable dialogue brought into sharp relief the potential good of education institutes working together within a CSP to create a sustainable educational infrastructure. Such partnerships will enable local economic growth and societal development, aligning with the strategic objectives of both nations.

A piece of practical advice shared was the necessity of developing consistent revenue streams and building capabilities and connections with industry. This could be done by establishing a strong and distinct foundation in learning and teaching. Over time, the venture can mature into a research-led institution that has secured industry partnerships and commercial activity.

This transition from learning and teaching to incorporating a robust research arm underscores a maturation process of higher education institutes. It is crucial for achieving a holistic educational impact locally and globally.<sup>7</sup> Commensurate with the status that a CSP will hold; a long-term approach to establishing education offerings in Vietnam signals Australia's commitment and investment in the relationships and community that it serves.

## Scaling social impact

**The discussion noted a gradual shift in university priorities, emphasising a recognition of social impact within their communities. This involves universities promoting or aiding socio-ecological transitions through innovative research and learning forms rather than solely focusing on commodifying knowledge creation.<sup>8</sup>**

As one participant observed, universities are demonstrating their role in global sustainability leadership through active engagement with local communities.<sup>9</sup> This involvement, reflecting a genuine commitment to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), highlights the responsibility of universities to contribute positively to the societal and moral good in the areas where they operate.<sup>10</sup>

It was noted that this vision marks a decisive shift from conventional revenue-only models, where offshore education investments are made to serve as an additional revenue stream for their parent campus without considering the benefits it can bring to the local community.

*“I think the establishment of the campus offshore is not a revenue stream. It's another piece in the puzzle of visibility, raising partnerships and making a contribution in this area which it was situated in. I was really struck by the [focus on] reinvestment of accumulated surplus. That's really unusual because that is not something I hear across the sector.”*

– Roundtable Participant<sup>11</sup>

7. Forbes, “Balancing the Higher Education Books: Why a Radical Rethink is Required.” Forbes, (May 18), accessed October 31, 2023, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ey-global-government--infrastructure/2023/05/18/balancing-the-higher-education-books-why-a-radical-rethink-is-required/?sh=476e89cf412d>.

8. accessed October 30, 2023, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1028315303260829>

9. Australian Technology Network, “RMIT University's major investment in Vietnam.” ATN, (June 5, 2023), <https://atn.edu.au/news-and-events/latest-news/rmit-universitys-major-investment-in-vietnam/>.



## Soft power and global citizenship

The narrative of Australia and Vietnam's educational engagement has been a story of one going from strength to strength from its earliest beginnings.

The discussion recognised the power of transnational education, especially between Australia and Vietnam, to enable students and academics to grow personally and professionally. It broadens the understanding and appreciation of diverse cultures, thereby nurturing global citizenship among students.<sup>12</sup>

Brand affiliation and international alumni cohorts significantly augment the global talent pool, building on the foundations of an “Australian experience”. The pride and value attached to these affiliations often translate into enhanced employability and global competence, which are crucial in today's interconnected world. The international alumni network serves as ambassadors for the educational ties between Australia and Vietnam.

Historical government initiatives, like the Colombo Plan to the contemporary New Colombo Plan, have been catalytic programs that have had a broader impact on cultural exchange and global talent development.<sup>13</sup> However, roundtable participants expressed caution regarding the competitiveness of Australia's future student mobility.

“Most of the international students from Europe and the US are much more mobile. They're much braver than Australians...I think there is that opportunity for students like myself who grew up in an English only family. It's actually so much better for us all to learn another language to whatever degree of proficiency and kind of be in a different environment. What a great opportunity with Australian campuses right on our doorstep.”

– Roundtable Participant<sup>14</sup>

UNESCO provides data on the global flow of tertiary-level students, which can be explored to understand the dynamics of student mobility between Australia, Vietnam, and neighbouring countries.<sup>15</sup> For Vietnamese students, Australia is still the fourth preference, with Japan, Korea and the US being preferred destinations. However,

10. Sustainable Development Solutions Network, “Accelerating Education for the SDGs in Universities”, (2020).

11. Industry participant in the Australia-Vietnam Perth Roundtable, 24 October 2023.

12. Reynolds, R., MacQueen, S. and Ferguson-Patrick, K., “Educating for global citizenship: Australia as a case study.” *International Journal of Development Education and Global Learning*, (2019), accessed October 31, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.18546/IJDEGL.11.1.07>.

13. Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), “New Colombo Plan,” Australian Government, accessed on October 30, 2023, [link](<https://www.dfat.gov.au/people-to-people/new-colombo-plan>).

14. Industry participants in the Australia-Vietnam Perth Roundtable, 24 October 2023.

15. UNESCO, “Global flow of tertiary-level students,” UNESCO, accessed on October 30, 2023, <http://uis.unesco.org/en/uis-student-flow>.

this is not reciprocated by the outbound volume or preference of Australian students.

The broader picture looks concerning. There's a noticeable disparity between Australia's and Vietnam's absolute student exchange numbers. Vietnam has an outbound mobility ratio of 5.2, compared to Australia's tiny 0.7.<sup>16</sup> This highlights that while initiatives such as the New Colombo Program hold significant cultural weight – they remain only for a few. Participants noted that a significant shift in the cultural tide toward outbound mobility remains critical for a new generation post-COVID if we continue to use higher education to build geopolitical ties.



## Enhancing employability

**The discourse on employability and accreditation in the Australia-Vietnam educational partnerships is evolving, emphasising the need for a more comprehensive approach to graduate capabilities and international qualification recognition.**

*“If students really understood that Australian businesses talked about the fact that if you have an international experience you are more attractive... You know students don't see that as something they put on their CV or makes them competitive.”*

– Roundtable Participant <sup>17</sup>

For Australian students, the conventional narrative of developing soft skills for employability needs a shake-up. Roundtable participants discussed how employability could be expanded and reframed to recognise offshore resilience and global competence. These attributes are nurtured through transnational education experiences, preparing graduates for a globalised job market.

The topic of accreditation within the context of employability remained relevant. A participant passionately stated, “What the CEOs of those firms were saying is they want broader students. What the accreditation body is saying...you know they were saying the opposite... the amount of churn that credit and recognising prior qualifications takes up in institutions and the gatekeepers you have to navigate through for particular disciplines and perceptions of value.”<sup>18</sup> This comment highlighted the disparity between industry expectations and the accreditation process, affecting employability and the perceived increase of unnecessary inefficiencies and roadblocks.

16. Total number of tertiary students from a country studying abroad, expressed as a percentage of total tertiary students enrolled in that country.

17. Industry participant in the Australia-Vietnam Perth Roundtable, 24 October 2023.

18. Industry participant in the Australia-Vietnam Perth Roundtable, 24 October 2023.



The roundtable raised a pressing need for a holistic approach to education. The insights from roundtable participants highlight a critical juncture where the traditional views on employability, especially for Australian students, are being challenged and expanded to include global competence and offshore resilience, skills vital in a globalised job market. Furthermore, the passionate discussions around accreditation reveal a significant gap between industry expectations and current academic processes, emphasising the urgency for streamlined, mutually recognised accreditation systems. This alignment would alleviate inefficiencies and barriers and mark a significant step towards a more interconnected and responsive global workforce. The call for action is clear: prioritising reciprocal accreditation recognition could profoundly transform the educational landscape, benefitting industries, sectors, and, most importantly, the future workforce in both Australia and Vietnam.

This could form a foundational education pillar of the CSP.

*“If the government were to just keep chipping away at those sorts of agreements [recognition of international qualifications], [it would be] transformative for the industry and the sector.”*

– Roundtable Participant<sup>19</sup>



19. Industry participant in the Australia-Vietnam Perth Roundtable, 24 October 2023.

# Conclusion

The profound impact of education on the Australia-Vietnam relationship extends across economic, geopolitical, and societal spheres, playing a core part in realising the shared goals of a CSP between Australia and Vietnam.

The roundtable discussion highlighted that looking ahead, the education sector must play a key role in addressing the pressing global challenges of our time. From climate change to technological advancements, the collaborative efforts between Australia and Vietnam through academic engagements and university-industry partnerships can spearhead innovative solutions.

This vision of harnessing education as a platform for global problem-solving advocates for a robust community of global citizens equipped with the knowledge, skills, and values necessary to navigate the complexities of the 21st

century must be addressed. Education will be a catalysing sector to deepen Australia and Vietnam's relationship to that of a CSP.

To materialise this vision, a revisited policy framework is imperative. Governments have the onus to create an enabling environment that fosters closer ties in education between Australia and Vietnam. This entails reviewing and revising the existing TNE policies and accreditation systems. By reducing bureaucratic roadblocks and promoting reciprocal recognition of qualifications, the Australian and Vietnamese governments can significantly enhance the ease of academic and professional engagements between the two nations. The impact of such policy amendments within the context of a CSP would be profound, stretching across the spectrum of global citizenship, employability, business diplomacy, and collaborations to tackle the world's biggest challenges.







## Recommendations for the CSP

### Vietnamese Government

1. **Enhanced collaboration:** Strengthen collaboration with Australian education institutes to address the skills shortages in Vietnam, particularly in areas of mutual interest such as green technology, healthcare, and digital innovation.
2. **Foreign ownership:** Greater recognition of the benefits of 100% foreign-owned higher education institutes (such as RMIT Vietnam) for the broader economic and social value that it also contributes to Vietnam.
3. **Industry-academia partnerships:** Foster industry-academia partnerships to ensure that the curricula and commercial research output are relevant to the evolving industry needs. Provide a supportive environment for Australian institutions to engage with local industries in Vietnam to provide practical experiences for students and assist in brokering industry partnerships.

### Australian Government

1. **Support TNE initiatives:** Continue to support and expand transnational education initiatives like the New Colombo Plan to promote student mobility, cultural exchange, and academic collaborations between Australia and Vietnam.
2. **Promote research collaborations:** Encourage and fund joint research collaborations between Australian and Vietnamese universities, particularly in areas that address global challenges like climate change, public health, and technological innovation.
3. **Engage with accreditation bodies:** Engage with accreditation bodies to explore pathways for reciprocal recognition of qualifications. This can facilitate smoother academic and professional transitions between Australia and Vietnam, thus addressing skills shortages and enhancing employability.

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## Images

Bushira Khilje, Vietnamese students celebrate graduation by throwing a gown in front of Saigon Central Post Office, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. April 25, 2018. Photograph. Shutterstock. 10 November 2023.

Duc Huy Nguyen, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam – May 31, 2014 : Aerial View Of RMIT University Area In District 7. Photograph. Shutterstock. 10 November 2023.

Fizkes, Young smiling business woman mentor leader write tasks creative ideas on sticky post it notes on glass wall, vietnamese female coach planning project corporate management on sticker scrum board. Photograph. Shutterstock. 10 November 2023.

Darren Lawrence/Unsplash, Headway/Unsplash, Mimi Thian/Unsplash, Tuan Truong/Unsplash.

Hien Ho/Pexels, Thanh Do/Pexels.

Khoamartin, Young male student studies for the examination in university. Photograph. Shutterstock. 10 November 2023.

Pixels Hunter, Multi exposure of abstract creative digital world map hologram on blurry modern office building background, tourism and traveling concept. Photograph. Shutterstock. 29 November 2023

Tom Wang, Students talking and walking on stairs. Photograph. Shutterstock. 29 November 2023.

Worawee Meepian, Group of Asian college student reading books and tutoring special class for exam at outdoors. Photograph. Shutterstock. 13 November 2023.

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