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AVPI FELLOWS PROGRAM

# Education - The Bridge That Connects Vietnam to Its Future

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## Key Takeaways:

- Education is the single most important pillar of the Australia-Vietnam relationship
- Vietnam is riding a wave of revolutionary change, driven by new political leadership committed to modernisation
- Australia and Vietnam must build “bridges of knowledge, skill, and innovation” to connect Vietnam to its future
- Vietnam’s ambitious national targets – including 10% GDP growth and developed country status by 2045 – depend on education as a driving force
- Education remains the single most important bond among the many that bind Australia and Vietnam together

During my time as Australia’s Ambassador to Vietnam, I was often asked “what is the key pillar of the Australia-Vietnam relationship?”. My answer, invariably, was “education”. I never got an argument because the Vietnamese understand (even better than Australians) that education is at the heart of everything – the foundation of human progress, growth, and opportunity.

There was a time when Australia’s focus in Vietnam was on building physical infrastructure: power lines, undersea cables, and bridges. We built some remarkable structures. But today what Vietnam needs are bridges of knowledge, skill, and innovation – the bridges that will connect Vietnam to its future.



## Vietnam’s Revolutionary Moment

Anyone who follows Vietnam knows it is currently riding a wave of quite revolutionary change. In part, this is a necessary response to the huge disruptions in global trade, technology and geopolitics. But, in equal part, these reforms are internally driven by a new political leadership that understands the urgent need for Vietnam to change gears economically.

The recent 14th Party Congress described education as a “top national policy” and “a driving force” for modernisation. It identified science, technology, innovation, and digital transformation as key enablers of economic growth. Among the targets set by the government for this new era are recognition of Vietnam as an “Emerging Market” by key global indices, 10% year-on-year GDP growth, and achieving developed country / high-income economy status by 2045 (with net zero emissions five years later).

If any other country proclaimed these goals, they would be politely dismissed. But history has demonstrated Vietnam’s uncanny ability to defy its sceptics.

## The Questions That Must Be Asked

If we accept that education is a “top national policy” and “a driving force” for modernisation, then we must ask: What is Vietnam’s education system doing to support the nation’s change-agenda? How are educational institutions adapting to meet the new challenges? Are government education and training bureaucracies doing enough to ensure that national economic targets are hit? And how well are Vietnam’s key foreign partners, including Australia, supporting these goals?

Despite sincere efforts by everyone involved, the honest answer to each of these questions is probably “not enough.”

## Equity and Social Cohesion

The positive economic impacts of technical and higher education are well understood. Less well appreciated are the important impacts that education has on equity and social cohesion. Expanding access to quality education for rural communities, ethnic minorities and disadvantaged groups should be framed as both a social justice and an economic imperative.

In Vietnamese culture, women are traditionally the managers of the household budget. But in the broader economy women continue to face headwinds compared to their male counterparts. Notwithstanding this, female entrepreneurs have founded and operate some of Vietnam’s most successful large businesses. Equality of educational opportunity will continue to enable women to make the best possible contribution to Vietnam’s economic and social development.

### Education as Soft Power

Education can also be a soft power multiplier in international relations. Outbound and inbound student mobility, joint research, and transnational education are tools for deepening integration into global value chains and knowledge networks.

Vietnam's top universities, particularly those that use English as the main medium of instruction, have the potential to become exporters of education services. With the right legal and regulatory settings, other world class western and Asian universities will be attracted to open branch campuses in Vietnam, just as RMIT did at the turn of the century.

In addition to educating students, Vietnam's top universities should aspire to becoming globally respected centres for research, publication, and thought leadership. For a country as internationally engaged as Vietnam is, there is a relative lack of academic foreign policy focus (with the notable exception of the Foreign Ministry's top notch Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam). In the future I hope we will see one or more Vietnamese universities establish centres for research and think-tanks specialising in foreign and security policy - for the benefit of Vietnam and the broader region.

Education remains the single most important bond amongst the many that bind Australia and Vietnam together, but it does not mean that we cannot do better. Indeed, we can and we must.



Andrew Goledzinowski is a senior foreign policy practitioner with experience across five continents, including as a senior Ambassador, Ministerial Advisor and United Nations official. He is respected amongst his peers as a strategic communicator and effective problem solver. He has won a number of awards for strengthening bilateral relation between Vietnam and Australia. His writings and speeches have contributed to a better understanding of Vietnam's unique place in an increasingly complex world.

As Australia's Ambassador to Vietnam, Andrew was among the most effective and high-profile diplomats in Hanoi. He managed an annual development program worth A\$100 million focussed on supporting economic growth, energy transition, digital transformation and human resource development. He strengthened political trust and strategic cooperation, leading to the elevation of Australia into the top tier of Vietnam's international relationships (Comprehensive Strategic Partnership)



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