

## SESSION 4 CASE STUDY 3

### Early career researchers working effectively together

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#### ABSTRACT



The RAID/VNUA early career research and mentoring program represents a significant collaboration between the Researchers in Agriculture for International Development (RAID) Network and the Vietnam National University of Agriculture (VNUA), with the support of the Crawford Fund and the Australian Volunteers Program. This program aims to enhance research capacity and foster international collaboration through a structured mentor partnership model. This paper outlines the attitudes, skills and capabilities needed by early career researchers to effectively work with researchers in developing countries and deliver high impact research. It discusses how the project team have been working through a co-design and co-leadership process when working remotely, as well as the challenges this can sometimes present. It also outlines some preliminary outcomes that indicate a positive impact on the participants' research capabilities and professional networks, and thoughts on how others can learn from the project's outcomes over the past 4 years.

This talk is about a program that has been going since 2020. At the moment we are calling it Early to Mid-Career Australian and Vietnamese Research Program. I will tell you about some of the developments we have had over the few years with this program, and some of the challenges that we have experienced. They have given new skills and attributes to our program participants and also to the group that has been working together to create this program.

In its current phase, the program has three specific partners: RAID Network; the Australian Volunteers Program; and the Vietnam National University of Agriculture (VNUA).

- RAID (Researchers in Agriculture for International Development) is a program of the Crawford Fund and funded by ACIAR. Our core motivations are to *connect* early to mid-career researchers, and *engage* our members, and to provide *support* for agricultural career development.
- The Australian Volunteers Program is an Australian Government-funded initiative that supports global volunteering. It supports partner organisations across the Pacific, Asia and Africa to achieve locally led change and the realisation of the Sustainable Development Goals. The Australian Volunteers Program is involved because it is supporting our participants to work in-country, and it provides funding for our program as well.
- Our in-country partner is Vietnam National University of Agriculture, which is an agriculture-focused university located in Hanoi, Vietnam. We have been working with the Agricultural Economics faculty to build our program.

This partnership has demonstrated the program's commitment to building a long-term agreement with early career researchers in Australia and early career researchers in Vietnam.

The program has had many iterations since it was begun in 2020 (Figure 1) during COVID-19 by David McGill and team at The University of Melbourne. It started as a five-week online workshop for early career researchers, and we engaged in basic research skills: developing research questions; survey analysis; design of research programs; and presenting our research.

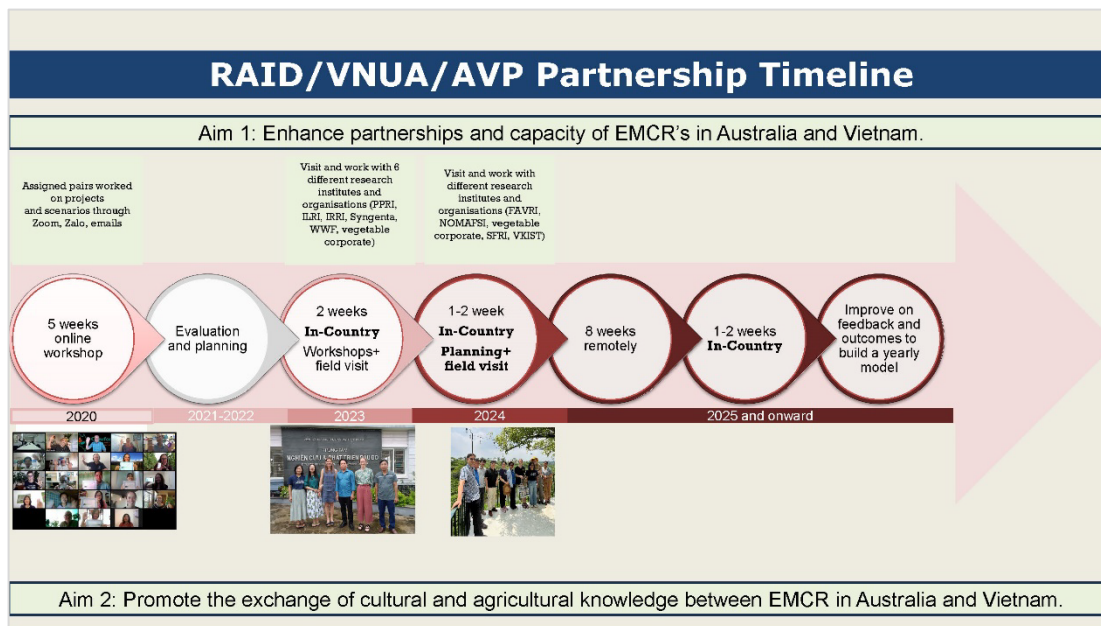


Figure 1.

I was a participant in that program, and that program significantly advanced my research skills and gave me the opportunity to have good interactions within the international agriculture arena. I developed a very good relationship with Phuong, one of my partners in Vietnam. The main objective of this was to develop both sides, Australian and Vietnamese, and to work together to develop our research skills. That was very successful.

We went into an evaluation and planning phase through 2021 and 2022 as the world opened up after COVID-19, and that gave RAID a way to develop the program further and see if we wanted to continue the collaboration.

Then in 2023 we had two weeks in-country with the cohort from 2020, and we were able to meet our Vietnamese partners in person and work again on some research skills. We were also able to see some Vietnamese agriculture and start to think more about the challenges that are experienced in Vietnam agriculture, and how these might relate to challenges in Australian agriculture. It was partnership, working together again, and identifying where we might be able to put our future research focus. That was, again, a great success.

A lot of the participants from that exercise decided to become program leaders. Three Vietnamese participants from 2020 came onto the leadership committee with Megan Williams, myself and the RAID team. We decided to plan again, assess what we had learnt, and design a program that would be sustainable year after year into the future. That was because, while it is good to go into a country and be fascinated by their agriculture, we needed to consider what that would lead to. How could this make progress? And as a volunteer organisation, how could we ensure that if I leave or Megan leaves the organisation, we can still carry this on. In essence, we were working with VNUA to create a sustainable program.

This year, we have just completed a five-day planning session in Vietnam with VNUA. We decided on an outline of what they would like to see and how to support their early career researchers, and then how we in Australia might implement some of the skills here as well.

Now, we have just decided, for the future we will have another remote component as part of that program with Vietnamese students as well as Australian students working together, two weeks in-country again, and then year on year it will just continue to improve.

### Some of the outcomes from this program.

In 2020, 12 Vietnamese and Australian early to mid-career student researchers (EMCRs) successfully completed the online research skills workshop. As I mentioned, this came at a critical time for a lot of the participants in that program. Many of them have since pursued PhDs, Masters degrees, or research fellowship jobs. That is an excellent outcome from that workshop.

In 2022, Me Vang, one of the Vietnamese students, completed a three-month internship in Australia, which was funded by the Crawford Fund. It was two members of the group, Megan and Anh Pham, who organised bringing Me Vang to Australia to see Australian agriculture and develop his English skills. That has enabled him to take on a Masters program in Korea this year!

Then in 2023, Australian program participants visited Vietnam to work on research modules with Vietnamese students.

This year, 2024, previous participants from the 2020 and 2023 cohorts are working together to create a yearly program, learning from previous outcomes and partnering with other universities. There is extensive evaluation and planning with Vietnamese partners to develop content for the next program. That those participants are now carrying this program forward is an excellent outcome.

### Challenges in setting the directions for 2025

Challenges help develop skills. One of the main points that we have been discussing with the team at VNUA is how to have a clear understanding of the candidates who can apply to join this program (Figure 2). Sometimes the content is too basic for PhD students to participate.

### Challenges helped develop skills!

- Agreed **clear understandings** of candidates who can apply, sometimes content too basic for PhD students to participate.
- Being **flexible** with timings for the Vietnam school year, coinciding with the Vietnamese summer.
- **Engagement** all year around from all parties, particularly during school terms.
- **Encouraging** everyone to have a voice and take ownership of work.
- RAID is a volunteer organisation, which often prevents expansion of program. **Time management** is critical!



Figure 2.

In 2020, the program was run at entry level, all about designing research. VNUA have decided that they would like to move forward now, and focus on particular research skills. This coming year, 2025, we believe we will be focusing on writing and on reading papers: that is, looking at journal articles, and structuring journal articles, and making sure you use the right format, and know where to send your article, and referencing. In other words, as VNUA's aims and needs are changing, we are trying to develop the program to meet those as well.

Another aspect we have been discussing is how to be flexible in the timing of the program, so it accommodates the Vietnam school year and coincides with the Vietnamese summer. We want to make sure our time in-country with our partners is at a time convenient for them as well.

Staff of VNUA are extremely busy throughout the year, so the time when we run the in-country component needs to be when they are on school holidays. But this creates more challenges: namely, being in the field when it is 37 degrees and 90% humidity – which coincides with the wet season (the photo in Figure 2 was taken as a storm was rolling in).

Managing engagement all year round from all parties, particularly during the school terms, is also a bit of a challenge. However, we aim to find out how staff of VNUA like to work: just with emails at night?; or by Zoom?; or by Zalo? And what about the Australian counterparts? In our volunteer organisation, RAID, we all have full-time jobs, so finding time when we can develop content is also a bit difficult, as is encouraging everyone to have a voice and take ownership of the work. However, we have discussed this with VNUA now, and we have agreed on certain components that we are all developing. And each meeting we work through a list of actions. Everyone is delivering their work, but also everyone's having a voice on how we are constructing the program. Time management is obviously critical.



The cohort from 2022.

### Contact us to take part next year

The program is a good way to enhance early research skills, both here and in Vietnam, and to celebrate successes as well at the end of the program. It will be running again next year, and we are just finalising the last details. To participate, please contact us:

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Megan Williams, RAID VNUA Program Lead, [meganwilliams@live.com.au](mailto:meganwilliams@live.com.au)

Jessica Fearnley-Pattison is the Vice President of the Researchers in Agriculture for International Development (RAID) Network. After completing a Bachelor of Rural Science, she received a Crawford Fund student award for her research in Cambodia, where she looked at adaptation of horticulture crops in different provinces. Jess now works as Development Officer for Temperate Fruits at the NSW Department of Primary Industries. Her work at NSW DPI is focused on research and extension working directly with industry and farmers to improve production sustainably in the apple and cherry industries. To complement her work, Jess is currently studying for a PhD in carbon sequestration in perennial orchards to help horticultural growers mitigate and adapt to a changing climate. Jess currently is facilitating the Vietnam National Agricultural University collaboration with RAID which connects early to mid-career researchers in Australia and Vietnam to improve research and communication skills, and foster international working relationships.