RMIT UNIVERSITY | 25 Years Together in Vietnam

Vietnam 2050: The vision ahead

Explore Vietnam’s future over the next 25 years with insights from RMIT University experts

Foreword

A few weeks after arriving in Vietnam, I visited a design studio at our Saigon South campus. Inside, students were gathered around their prototypes, discussing how fashion might evolve in a world shaped by climate change, automation, and cultural renewal. What struck me most was not just their imagination, but their sense of purpose. They believed that the choices they make today can influence the kind of world we live in tomorrow.

That moment has stayed with me and in many ways, it encapsulates what I've witnessed since joining RMIT Vietnam: a country that is forward-looking and deeply engaged with the world, and a generation of young Vietnamese who are not simply anticipating the future but actively working to create it. Their approach is collaborative and interdisciplinary, mixed with a strong understanding of how technology can be used to advance society.

Vietnam is at a pivotal point in its development. Rapid urbanisation, technological disruption, demographic shifts, and the global climate crisis are all converging, raising urgent questions about how we live, learn, govern, and grow. In this context, bold ideas, rigorous thinking, and future-focused dialogue are more important than ever.

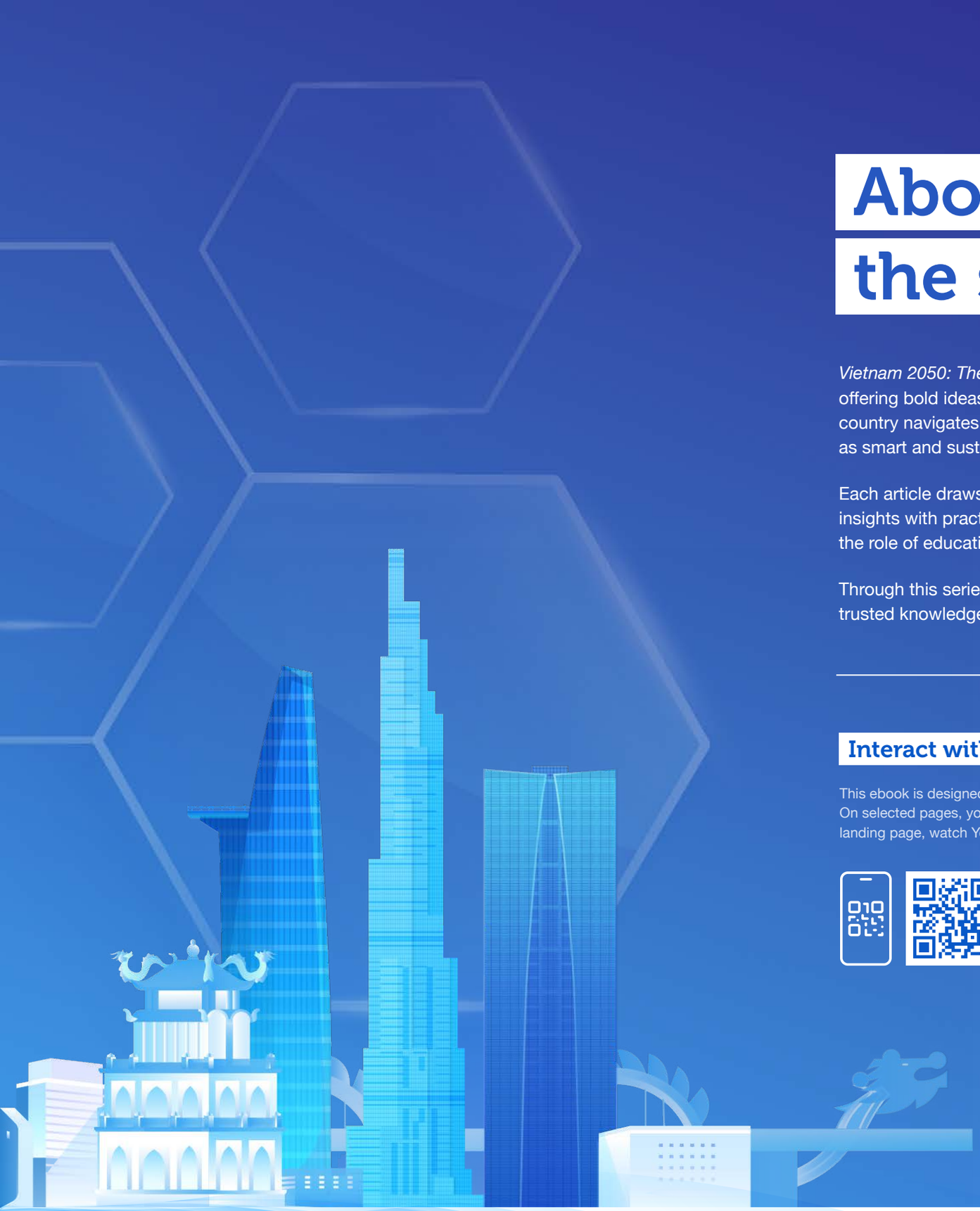
At RMIT, we've always believed that shaping the future starts with asking better questions today.

This series - *Vietnam 2050: The vision ahead* - brings together expert voices from across our University who are thinking critically about these transformations. These articles reflect years of teaching, research, and meaningful engagement with students, communities, and industries. They do not claim to offer all the answers, but they aim to spark deeper conversations and shared imagination. As a university of technology, design and enterprise, we provide the necessary environment to spark that imagination.

My hope is that this collection inspires you to think boldly, question openly, and envision Vietnam not just as it is, but as it could become.

Professor Scott Thompson-Whiteside

Pro Vice-Chancellor and General Director
RMIT Vietnam



About the series

Vietnam 2050: The vision ahead is a thought leadership series powered by RMIT University's experts, offering bold ideas and long-term thinking on what Vietnam could become over the next 25 years. As the country navigates an era of rapid change, this series explores major transformations across key areas such as smart and sustainable cities, education, technology, innovation, and cultural identity.

Each article draws on the academic and industry expertise of RMIT's educators, combining research insights with practical recommendations. The series not only envisions Vietnam's future, but also highlights the role of education, creativity, and collaboration in shaping that future.

Through this series, RMIT Vietnam affirms its commitment to contributing to the nation's development as a trusted knowledge partner, helping connect ideas with action, and aspiration with strategy.

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to watch our video series

Our experts

From smart cities and education to technology and culture, RMIT University's experts contribute deep knowledge, forward-thinking perspectives, and practical experience. Their sharp, research-driven insights, firmly rooted in real-world contexts, form the core spirit of this series.

Education and human capital

Professor Sherman Young

Deputy Vice-Chancellor Education Vice-President

Associate Professor Seng Kiat Kok

Dean of Students

Students & Education Portfolio

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Director, Academic Experience & Success

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Dr Sreenivas Tirumala

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Dr Thuy Nguyen

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Dr Hai-Nguyen (Hann) Nguyen

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Dr Huy Pham

Senior Lecturer, Finance

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Dr Phong Nguyen

Lecturer, Blockchain Enabled Business

The Business School

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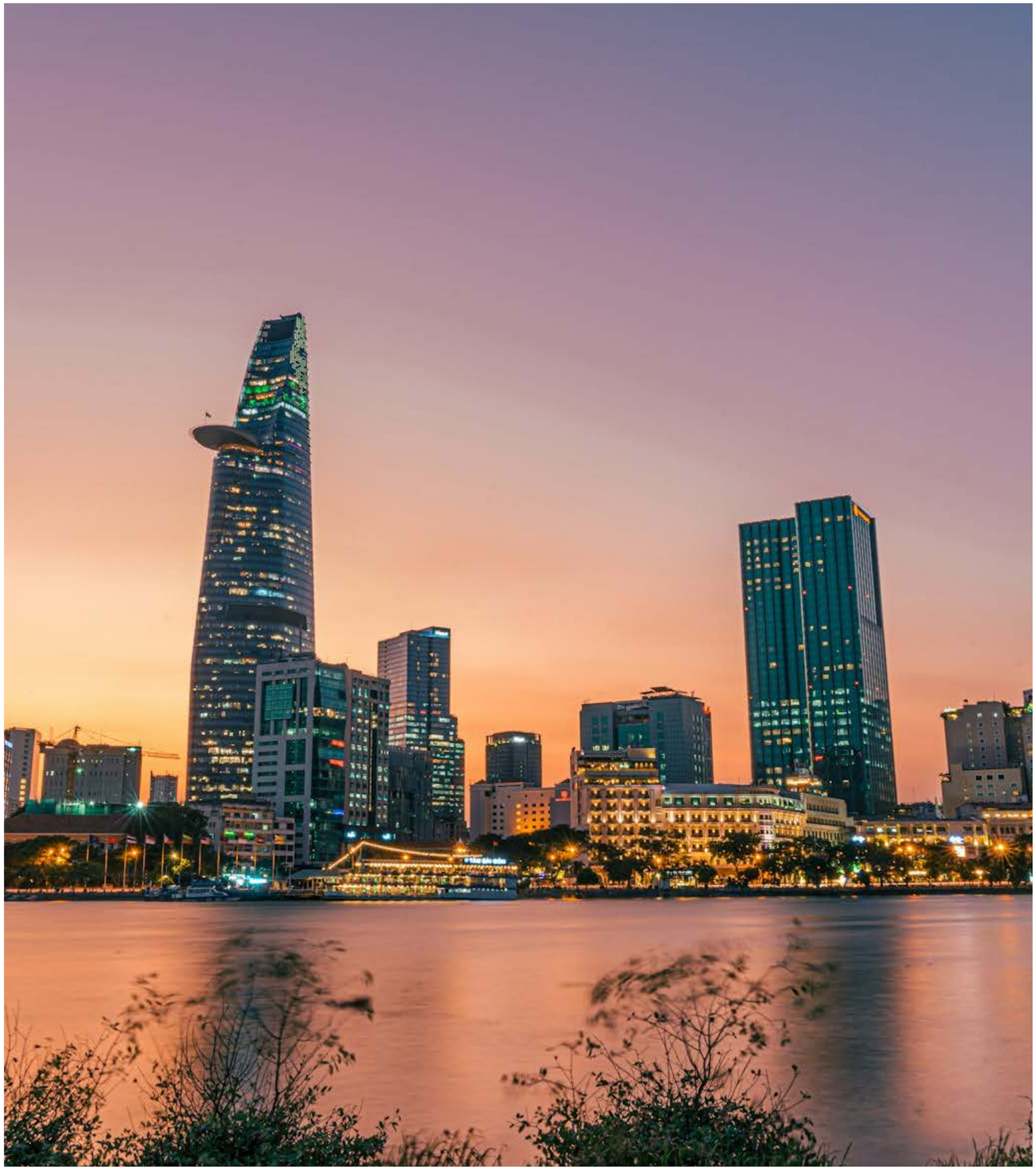

Section 1

SMART AND SUSTAINABLE VIETNAM

Photo:
Tron Le – unsplash.com

Reimagining Ho Chi Minh City by 2050:
A smart and inclusive megacity

Scan or click here

to watch the companion video for this article.

As Vietnam eyes 2050, Ho Chi Minh City is leading the nation's urban shift, aiming to become a smart, sustainable metropolis shaped by bold planning, deep reform, and human-centred innovation.

This article opens a two-part series on the future of smart and sustainable cities in Vietnam. We begin with Ho Chi Minh City - the country's most dynamic and densely populated metropolis - and examine the urgent choices ahead.

Drawing on insights from Professor Trung Nguyen, co-lead of the RMIT Vietnam Asia Pacific Smart and Sustainable Cities Hub, the article explores the city's current progress, its 2050 vision, and the reforms needed to ensure a transformation that is smart, inclusive and resilient.

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A city under pressure: Smart ambitions meet complex realities

“Ho Chi Minh City is not just leading Vietnam's digital urban development,” says Professor Trung. “It’s at the very heart of ASEAN’s megacity future.”

Yet while the city has laid important foundations, it also faces mounting challenges from unchecked urban sprawl and climate-related risks to institutional fragmentation.

The Smart City Development Plan and Vietnam’s National Digital Transformation Strategy have guided progress. Key efforts include the launch of a Smart Urban Operations Centre, a growing digital services network, GIS-based flood monitoring, and Center for Digital Transformation. Vietnam’s digital infrastructure is also improving fast - ranking 19th globally in mobile internet and 35th in fixed broadband.

Yet implementation remains uneven. Projects like Saigon Sports City and Thu Thiem Eco Smart City showcase promise in green design, affordable housing, inter-agency coordination, and low budget retention, yet they still constrain progress.

According to the 2025 IESE Cities in Motion Index (CIMI), Ho Chi Minh City ranks 132 out of 183 cities globally, with particularly low scores in urban planning (166th), environment (162nd), mobility and transportation (130th). Despite digital progress, challenges remain in governance, environmental resilience, and citizen engagement.

With over 14 million residents today and 66% of its area (based on Ho Chi Minh City’s pre-merger boundaries) projected to be at risk of flooding by 2050, the need for inclusive, resilient, and data-driven planning has never been more urgent. The next chapter in the city’s transformation will require more than technology as it will demand stronger, smarter governance and a continuous effort to build public trust in the city’s shared future.

“The future lies not in chasing technology alone, but in building co-created cities that serve both efficiency and equity.”

Professor Trung Nguyen
Interim Deputy Dean
Engagement and International
The Business School

Vision 2050: Compact, data-driven, human-centred

Looking to 2050, Ho Chi Minh City aims to become Vietnam’s hub for finance, innovation, and technology - with growing influence across Southeast Asia. The city has merged with Binh Duong and Ba Ria-Vung Tau, forming one of Southeast Asia’s most expansive mega-urban regions.

Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) is set to reshape the city’s form. By 2035, 355km of metro lines are planned to connect the central district with surrounding satellite towns. Inspired by Tokyo and Seoul, the city plans for high-density, walkable zones with distinct functions from finance and logistics to culture and public life.

Technological investment is accelerating. With 5G expansion and AI applications in mobility and public services, the city is gradually moving toward real-time, data-driven governance. Under Vietnam’s national strategy for digital government development (Decision 942/QD-TTg issued by the Prime Minister of Vietnam on 15 June 2021), the country aims to join the top 30 nations in the UN e-government development index by 2030, with Ho Chi Minh City expected to lead this transition through digital service delivery, workforce training, and data-driven public management. Globally, the city draws lessons from places like Singapore, Seoul, and Shenzhen - cities that have merged digital tools with public needs.

Professor Trung stresses that the future lies not in chasing technology alone, but in building co-created cities that serve both efficiency and equity.

Building the future: leadership, design, and talent

To realise its vision, Ho Chi Minh City must act decisively over the next decade. Priorities include expanding the city’s bus and metro networks and enhancing airport connectivity, integrating digital platforms across sectors, and nurturing a digitally capable workforce. Predictive planning tools like AI and open data will be key to improving citywide coordination and responsiveness.

But infrastructure alone won’t suffice. “True transformation requires deep reform in leadership mindset, institutional design, and human capital development. Short-term solutions may entrench inefficiencies unless grounded in long-term strategy,” says Professor Trung.

Inclusion must also be embedded from the start. Drawing inspiration from cities like Barcelona and Seoul, Ho Chi Minh City can pilot co-design approaches that allow communities to shape their own spaces. Digital platforms like UDI Maps and My Parking should be scaled to reach peripheral districts. While digital skills remain unevenly distributed in Vietnam’s labor force, expanding digital literacy is essential.

“True transformation requires deep reform in leadership mindset, systems, and institutional design.”

In many major cities around the world, the private sector plays a crucial role in developing urban transport infrastructure. Ho Chi Minh City should also adopt appropriate public–private partnership (PPP) models to effectively leverage this resource. To attract and sustain private investment, the city can introduce policy incentives such as urban tech sandboxes, innovation funds, and streamlined regulatory frameworks. International collaboration - with organisations like JICA or networks such as the ASEAN Smart Cities Network, and global platforms including the Smart Cities Council, the Centre for Urban Transformation (World Economic Forum), and UN-Habitat (United Nations) - can provide vital momentum.

Research institutions like RMIT also play a crucial role. Through digital labs, policy dialogues, and capacity-building, universities can help cities test bold ideas and scale what works.

For Professor Trung, this transformation is about building a larger city and redefining what an Asian megacity can look like. What excites him most is the chance to build a place where everyone can thrive.

“This journey gives us a chance to create a city that’s larger in size and deeper in meaning. A place where a factory worker and a tech entrepreneur can live side by side; where public spaces invite connection; and where young people feel they belong - not just in the economy, but in the story of the city itself.”

To those who are shaping the city’s future, he offers a final reflection: “Learn how cities breathe, through data and emerging technologies such as AI or smart platforms, and through dreams, struggles, and human connection. Planning is a technical task, and it’s also an act of care. The tools will change. But the soul of the city - how it lifts people up, brings them together, and gives them a place to belong - that’s what truly matters.”

Story: Quan Dinh H.

Photo: Quang – stock.adobe.com

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Section 1 Smart and sustainable Vietnam

Vietnam's cities in 2050: Smart, sustainable and liveable

Over the next 25 years, the Asia-Pacific region will reshape the global urban future. For Vietnam, urgent and strategic action is needed to stay ahead in the race toward smart, green, and inclusive cities.

Building on our previous exploration of Ho Chi Minh City's urban future, this article expands the lens to examine how Vietnam fits into Asia-Pacific's fast-changing urban landscape.

From advanced urban centres like Tokyo, Singapore, Seoul or Melbourne to rising hubs such as Kuala Lumpur, Asia-Pacific is undergoing a powerful urban transformation. Vietnam, with its fast urbanisation, young population, and open economy, has the foundations to advance. But major gaps in planning, infrastructure, and governance continue to hold the country back.

"Vietnam is at a pivotal moment," says Professor Trung Nguyen, co-lead of the RMIT Vietnam Asia Pacific Smart and Sustainable Cities Hub. "We either seize the chance to shape a new generation of smart and sustainable cities or risk being left behind as the region moves forward."

Where does Vietnam stand in the smart and sustainable cities race?

Vietnam has made steady progress in laying the foundation for smart cities. By the end of 2024, many localities across Vietnam had established smart city initiatives, with many operational centres launched to enhance services in transport, healthcare, and digital education.

Cities like Danang have led with early pilots in smart water and transport, while Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City have introduced smart cards and public Wi-Fi. Major tech players including Viettel, VNPT, and FPT are also pushing forward AI and IoT solutions for urban governance.

Despite these efforts, Vietnam trails behind regional peers. In the 2025 IMD Smart City Index, Ho Chi Minh City ranks 101st out of 146 cities, and Hanoi 88th. Another global index (CIMI 2025) places HCMC 132nd out of 183, with low scores in urban planning, environment, and governance.

Beyond infrastructure, Vietnam faces deeper structural challenges: fragmentation in governance, talent attraction and retention, and mechanisms for performance measurement. Certain policies remain disconnected from on-the-ground realities, while rapid urbanisation continues to outpace the readiness of infrastructure, institutions, and the public sector workforce. These issues are compounded by climate risks and widening regional disparities. Without bold reforms in planning, the goal of building smart, sustainable, and liveable cities will remain out of reach.

What smart sustainable cities will demand by 2050 and where Vietnam fits in

Asia-Pacific is shaping the future of urbanism through data-driven, climate-smart innovation. Cities like Seoul, Shenzhen, and Tokyo have already integrated digital twins, real-time data, and green infrastructure into their urban fabric. National programs such as Japan's Society 5.0 and Singapore's Smart Nation strategy are setting benchmarks.

Vietnam is involved in regional initiatives too. Hanoi, HCMC, and Danang are part of the ASEAN Smart Cities Network, and recent APEC forums have promoted green transport and climate-resilient development.

According to Professor Trung, by 2050 cities will be more flexible, more sustainable and data-governed. Digital twins will allow real-time planning, public transport systems will be automated in many aspects, and renewable energy will power dense urban zones. But success won't come automatically.

"There's a risk of focusing only on technology while ignoring social dimensions like privacy, equity, and inclusion," he said. "Cities must be people-centred. Technology should serve communities, not replace them."

Building future-ready cities starts with leadership, design, and talent

To prepare for 2050, Vietnam must develop a long-term urban strategy that goes beyond political cycles. Immediate priorities include building nationwide digital infrastructure - 5G networks, data centres, and broadband access, especially in underserved areas - alongside developing human capital on both the supply and demand sides and narrowing the digital divide across the country.

Vietnam should develop a national roadmap for smart and sustainable cities based on the five-phase framework proposed by the Asian Development Bank (ADB): City Diagnostics, Readiness Assessment, Strategy Development, Implementation Planning, and Monitoring and Evaluation. A central coordinating body - working across government, industry, and academia - will be essential to ensure consistency.

> **"By 2050 cities will be more flexible, more sustainable and data-governed."**
>
> **Professor Trung Nguyen**
> Interim Deputy Dean Engagement and International
> *The Business School*

It is essential to focus on each category and indicator within the six core components of a smart and sustainable city: smart mobility, smart living, smart environment, smart people, smart government, and smart economy. For instance, smart mobility infrastructure should encompass roads, airports, and logistics systems, each with clearly defined performance indicators. To ensure effective implementation, a smart management system with clear lines of accountability and an independent audit body must also be established.

A major opportunity lies in the country's ongoing administrative reform. Professor Trung sees this as a chance to modernise governance and reduce institutional fragmentation. If aligned with smart urban planning, it could empower local authorities to experiment, share data, and coordinate across regions.

Investment should prioritise climate-resilient infrastructure, integrated public transit systems, such as BRT and metro lines connected to airports, green housing, and open spatial data platforms. These investments are more than just technological upgrades; they are key to building resilience and ensuring inclusive growth.

Photo: siraphol – stock.adobe.com

Vietnam's cities in 2050: Smart, sustainable and liveable

> **"Cities must be people-centred. Technology should serve communities, not replace them."**

Equally important is strengthening smart governance. As of the end of 2023, around 2,200 e-services were available via the National Public Service Portal, Vietnam is improving its ability to manage cities through real-time data. Standardising open data and building local capacity in data analytics will boost transparency and evidence-based decision-making.

Professor Trung believes education and research are at the heart of this transformation. Institutions like RMIT (Vietnam and Australia) can lead by offering interdisciplinary programs in technology, planning, climate, and data science. Digital city labs, urban policy forums, and regional collaborations on smart agriculture are just some of the ways universities can support national capacity.

For him, this has been a deeply meaningful journey. “When Ho Chi Minh City’s first metro line opened in 2024, I was genuinely moved by the public’s excitement. It wasn’t just infrastructure. It was a symbol of our shared aspiration for a more liveable, modern, and humane city.”

What inspires him most is the opportunity to reimagine how cities serve people. “If I could champion one change in high-density areas of a megacity like Ho Chi Minh City, it would be compact, integrated urban design, like in Singapore, where housing, parks, and transport are seamlessly connected. Cities like that are not just efficient, but deeply human.”

“The success of a smart and sustainable city is not measured by technology or infrastructure alone, but by how we nurture young people and empower its citizens, creating the conditions for them to co-create,” Professor Trung said.

Story: Quan Dinh H.

Photo: Hanoi Photography – stock.adobe.com

Paving Vietnam's path to food security amidst climate change

By 2050, what's on a typical Vietnamese family's dinner table and how much it costs could look very different. Amidst a changing climate and growing demand, Vietnam's food security will depend on how sustainably, safely, and equitably the agriculture and food systems can develop.

Photo: Freepik

As climate pressures intensify, so do the risks to Vietnam's food system. Rising temperatures, saltwater intrusion, and extreme weather are already threatening crops, livestock, and aquaculture. But as RMIT Vietnam lecturers Dr Tuyen Truong and Dr Tam Le point out, the path to food security in 2050 is not just about defending against loss. It's about transforming how food is grown, processed, and accessed in a way that supports both people and planet.

Stress on the system

"Vietnam's rice and aquaculture sectors are on the frontlines of the climate crisis," said Dr Tuyen Truong, Program Manager for Food Technology and Nutrition at RMIT Vietnam. These sectors have a strategic importance to national food security, exports, and rural livelihoods. But rice-growing areas are shrinking, freshwater is becoming scarcer, and yields are less stable.

Between 2012 and 2022, the area used for rice cultivation dropped from 7.76 to 7.11 million hectares, and could fall to just 6.42 million hectares by 2030. At the same time, water storage in key regions is as low as 40-50 per cent of the design capacity, undermining irrigation systems and crop productivity.

Aquaculture, particularly in the Mekong Delta, is also under pressure. "Salinity intrusion, water stress, and disease outbreaks are intensified by rising temperatures and erratic weather," said Dr Tuyen.

Dr Tam Le, a lecturer in The Business School at RMIT Vietnam who has extensively researched the agri-food industry, highlighted broader vulnerabilities: "Climate change disrupts food supply chains and increases post-harvest losses – all of which add cost and instability to the system. These challenges can widen inequality in access to safe and nutritious food for low-income consumers."

For instance, typhoons and floods regularly damage transport infrastructure and delay the movement of perishable goods. In 2024, Typhoon Yagi alone left more than 95,000 people at risk of food insecurity across 14 provinces in Vietnam.

Dr Tam's research also shows that firms in the food sector are struggling to maintain food safety standards due to climate-induced shocks, rising costs, and infrastructure gaps.

She added: "New foodborne pathogens and scarcer natural resources are forcing firms to rethink their product choices and research and development of hazard control systems. The firms that struggle the most with the costs of food safety practices are those with limited capacity to adapt to change."

Systemic shifts for the long term

Dr Tam says, "Vietnam's food security by 2050 will depend on how resiliently the food production transitions and how systemic the innovative practices are."

She highlights three important dimensions for the transition of the agri-food system: (1) development of climate-resilient crop varieties, (2) adoption of low-emission, climate-smart, and inclusive agricultural practices, (3) enhancement of supply chain infrastructure for reduced food losses and quality/safety assurance.

Vietnam has, in fact, made important strides in adopting science-based, climate-smart solutions in recent years.

One notable government commitment is the One Million Hectares program – a plan to establish low-emission, high-quality rice production in the Mekong Delta by 2030. This includes the use of alternate wetting and drying – irrigation, which can reduce methane emissions from rice fields by up to 50 per cent.

Low-carbon supply chains are emerging for crops like dragon fruit and seafood. In the livestock sector, smallholder farmers are using biogas digesters to turn waste into clean energy, reducing emissions and improving sanitation.

Farmers are also adopting integrated rice-shrimp systems and switching to salt- and drought-tolerant crop varieties, which offer both economic and environmental benefits. "These practices enhance adaptive capacity in salinity-affected areas while improving farmer incomes," Dr Tuyen said.

What the future holds

Food security is not just about availability – it's about accessibility, safety, quality, and resilience. Looking ahead, the RMIT lecturers believe advanced technologies will play a key role.

AI-powered precision farming, blockchain-based food traceability, and real-time climate risk analytics offer major potential.

Emerging alternatives such as microalgae- and insect-based feed, or even cellular agriculture could also reduce pressure on traditional protein sources while supporting nutrition and sustainability goals.

But innovation alone isn't enough. "All these interventions must be nutrition-sensitive. We need to prioritise not just more food, but better-quality diets," Dr Tuyen added.

In addition, ensuring equity and inclusion will be important. This means providing access to technologies, knowledge, and decision-making for women, youth, and smallholders.

By 2050, food security in Vietnam could mean more than avoiding shortages – it could mean ensuring that people in every region have access to safe, affordable, climate-resilient food. Imagine school meals made with ingredients from low-emission farms, or small urban markets offering fresh produce grown sustainably nearby. That's the kind of change experts believe is possible if the right steps are taken now.

"What gives me hope is that transformation is already underway. Recent programs and innovations show that Vietnam isn't waiting; it's acting," Dr Tuyen said. "The next step is to scale, integrate, and institutionalise these efforts through science, inclusive governance, and sustainability-focused education."

Story: Ngoc Hoang

Photo: Pugun & Photo Studio – stock.adobe.com

> **"Vietnam's food security by 2050 will depend on how resiliently the food production transitions and how systemic the innovative practices are."**

Dr Tam Le
Lecturer, Blockchain Enabled Business
The Business School

> **"Vietnam's rice and aquaculture sectors are on the frontlines of the climate crisis."**

Dr Tuyen Truong
Program Manager, Food Technology and Nutrition
School of Science, Engineering & Technology

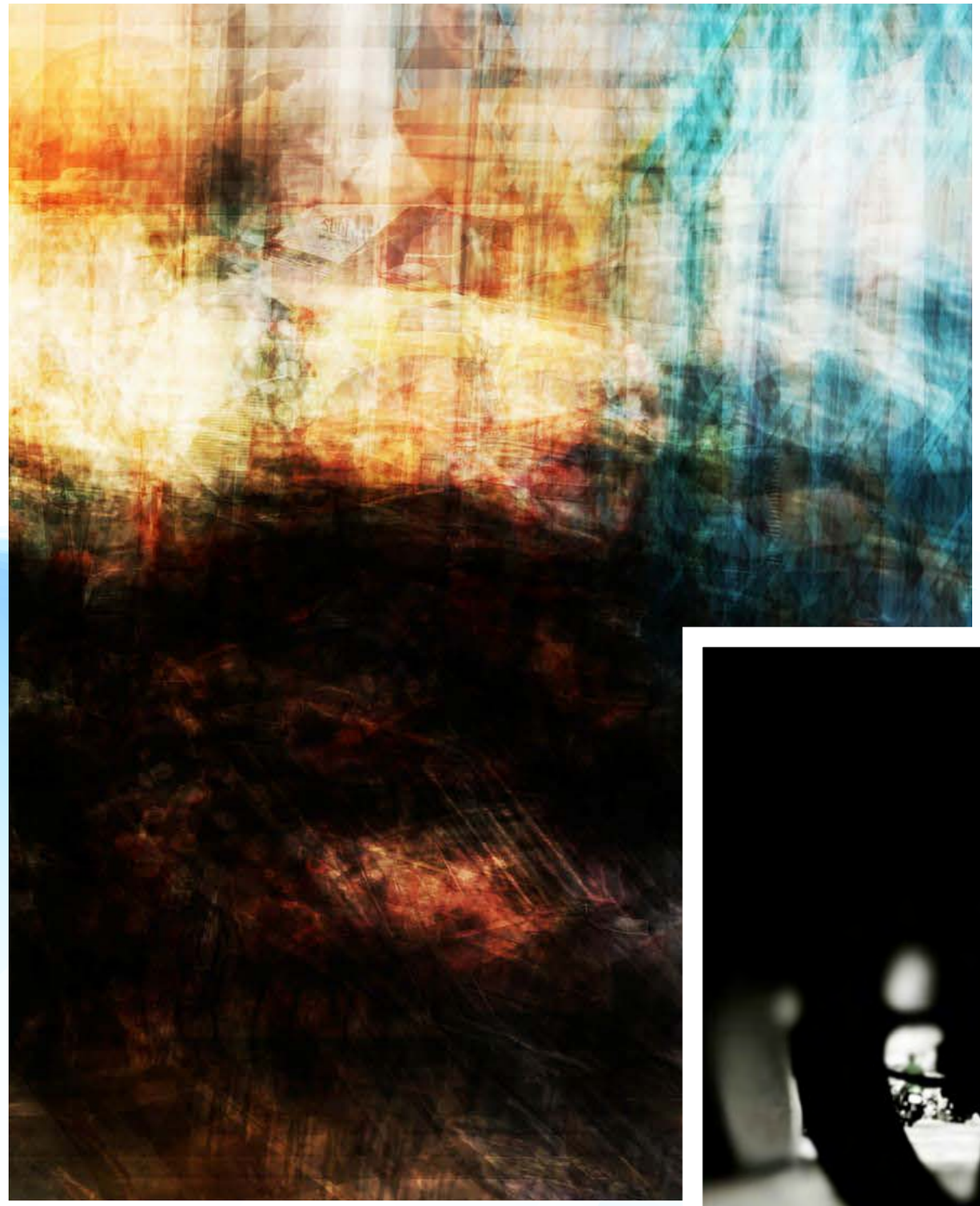


Photo: Andrew Stiff

Section 1 Smart and sustainable Vietnam

Designing the future by honouring the "everyday"

In Ho Chi Minh City, rapid growth often overshadows the ordinary spaces where real life happens.

Dr Andrew Stiff, Senior Lecturer in Design Studies at RMIT Vietnam, is challenging that through the River Cities Network – a global project reimagining how rivers and urban life intersect through creative practice.

The River Cities Network (RCN) is a multi-sited global initiative to pursue research on the interrelationship between cities and their rivers and waterways. In Vietnam, the research centres on the Te Canal, using creative practice, from film and sound to VR and archival storytelling, to document and reimagine this often-overlooked space. The goal is to make visible the everyday urban heritage that city planning often neglects.

A richer reading of the city

Most heritage efforts in Vietnam focus on temples, pagodas, or colonial villas. "Traditional heritage, heritage of the past, is well acknowledged," Dr Stiff explained. "But Ho Chi Minh City has struggled to define its identity beyond being an economic engine." His work drew attention to a different type of heritage: the everyday, sensory-rich spaces where urban life actually happens.

Photo: Andrew Stiff

The Te Canal (known as Kenh Te locally), which divides Districts 4 and 7, once supported a floating market and still hums with informal trade. “This area offers insight into what we might call the heritage of the future,” Dr Stiff said. “It’s not about monuments, but about lived experience, cultural rhythms, and relationships with the environment.”

These are the textures that give the city character – the smell of street food, the sound of karaoke at dusk, the way infrastructure yields to water during full moons. “We all love to hate karaoke,” Dr Stiff joked, “But how quiet did the city feel during the lockdown without bike horns and karaoke? These aren’t nuisances, they’re the soul of the city.”

Rather than clinging to nostalgia or wiping the slate clean, the River Cities Network advocates for thoughtful redevelopment. “There’s a danger in pastiche, but also in high-rise erasure,” he said. “We need cities that evolve but remain distinctly Vietnamese.”

This means planning that embraces informality, such as the remaining traders along Tran Xuan Soan street, and supports community life without displacing it. It also means acknowledging the canal not as a constraint but as a cohabitant of the city. “When the tide rises and the street floods, it’s not failure,” Dr Stiff said. “It’s an ongoing negotiation between nature and infrastructure.”

Creative practice as urban insight

Unlike traditional urban studies, Dr Stiff approaches the city through a designer’s lens. His work uses creative tools like moving image, AR, and sound design to document spaces and provoke new ways of seeing them. “Creative documentation doesn’t just record, it reconfigures how we understand place,” he said.

The River Cities Archive, developed through this research, is a growing digital collection of stories, visuals, and sensory data. For policymakers and developers, it’s a resource to build more culturally sensitive planning. For residents, it’s a platform to see their daily lives reflected as meaningful and worth protecting.

Dr Stiff is also helping shape future designers through education. At RMIT Vietnam, his students learn to look beyond buildings to atmospheres and narratives. “I want students to see the everyday as something exceptional,” he said. “They are the future stewards of the city’s identity.”

That identity, he argued, will not be found in uniform towers or gated compounds. It lives in the interplay between past and present, form and feeling, people and place. “Cities like Tokyo show us it’s possible to modernise without losing soul,” he said. “Vietnam can do the same if we design with care.”

His advice to the next generation? Embrace complexity. “Urban problems don’t have perfect solutions,” he said. “But they do have possibilities. And those start with listening -- to communities, to space, and to the overlooked rhythms of everyday life.”

As Ho Chi Minh City looks toward 2050, its future may depend not just on innovation and infrastructure, but on how well it preserves what’s already there: the unexceptional, the informal, the deeply human parts of the city that make it feel like home.

Story: Ha Hoang

> **”Urban problems don’t have perfect solutions, but they do have possibilities. And those start with listening - to communities, to space, and to the overlooked rhythms of everyday life.”**

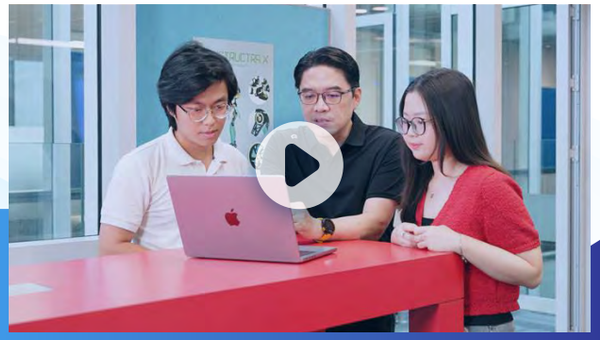
Dr Andrew Stiff
Senior Lecturer, Design Studies
School of Communication & Design

Section 2

INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY FOR IMPACT

Photo: RMIT

More cyber threats are coming. Will our society be ready for them?



Scan or click here to watch the companion video for this article.

Photo: Freepik

As Vietnam pushes to become a digital society by 2030 and a high-income nation by 2050, its ability to secure digital systems will be critical to protecting people, services, and growth.

Vietnam's rapid digitalisation is driving economic opportunity and social innovation, but with that progress comes exposure. In 2024 alone, 14.5 million user accounts were compromised in cyber attacks, and ransomware incidents surged by 70 per cent, primarily targeting high-value sectors like banking and public services.

Media reports have detailed cases of individuals losing their savings overnight after their bank accounts were hacked or falling victim to online scams that cost them hundreds of millions of VND. As digital tools become more central to daily life, the personal cost of cyber crime is becoming more visible and more painful.

The country's digital economy is expected to reach US$45 billion by 2025, with projections in the range of US$90-200 billion for 2030. By 2050, the digital economy is expected to be a major driver of Vietnam's GDP, making strong cyber security measures essential for long-term stability and growth.

"Cyber security is needed to ensure safer transactions, resilient businesses, protected infrastructure, and a digitally empowered society," said Dr Huo Chong Ling, Senior Lecturer in Software Engineering at RMIT Vietnam.

"Progress in this area also supports Vietnam's continued appeal as a destination for foreign investment and technological innovation."

Envisioning a secure smart society

By 2050, Vietnam's major cities will be deeply integrated with digital technologies. Transportation, healthcare, education, and government services will operate through

interconnected systems. Yet the more connected the system is, the more critical its defences become.

A cyber attack might not just crash a website – it could shut down a city. It could disable hospital systems, expose personal medical records, drain savings accounts, or knock out power grids in minutes. As Vietnam becomes more digital, the risks will only be more wide-ranging and affect more people.

“Securing digital societies where millions of devices are interconnected through the internet will be an ongoing issue,” said Dr Sreenivas Tirumala, Senior Lecturer in IT at RMIT Vietnam.

The RMIT academic believes Vietnam’s future digital society must be underpinned by secure identity, data, and infrastructure. Promising technologies include AI-driven firewalls that can detect threats early and decentralised digital identity solutions powered by blockchain.

> **“Securing digital societies where millions of devices are interconnected through the internet will be an ongoing issue.”**

Dr Sreenivas Tirumala
Senior Lecturer,
Information Technology
School of Science,
Engineering & Technology

“As more AI-based threats emerge, we should use AI-driven cybersecurity models to counter them. AI models are automated, adaptive, and can learn from historic and real-time data,” he said. “An AI-driven approach can help the infrastructure heal itself – at least to some extent – in case of external attacks.”

Dr Tirumala also highlighted the likely dominance of quantum computing in the future. This emerging technology promises computers that can solve very complex problems that are well beyond the limits of today’s computers. Quantum computing could be misused to break many encryption algorithms currently in place, and everyday people could lose access to care, banking, or identity protection in seconds.

“By 2050, it can be predicted that most cloud-based companies will be offering quantum computers as a service at a nominal subscription fee. There is thus an immediate requirement for developing data encryption approaches that set us up for this future”, he said. “It is also the right time for academic institutions to introduce quantum computing basics into cyber security courses to make learners industry ready.”

Policies and people must lead the way

While technology evolves quickly, Dr Tirumala and Dr Ling both stress that people and policies will ultimately determine success.

“To defend against cyber threats, especially those targeting critical infrastructure, we need national standards that ensure consistent, regulated security practices,” said Dr Tirumala.

Drawing inspiration from the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) in the US and similar models in Israel, China, New Zealand, and Australia, he emphasised the importance of such agencies in upholding standards and raising awareness in society.

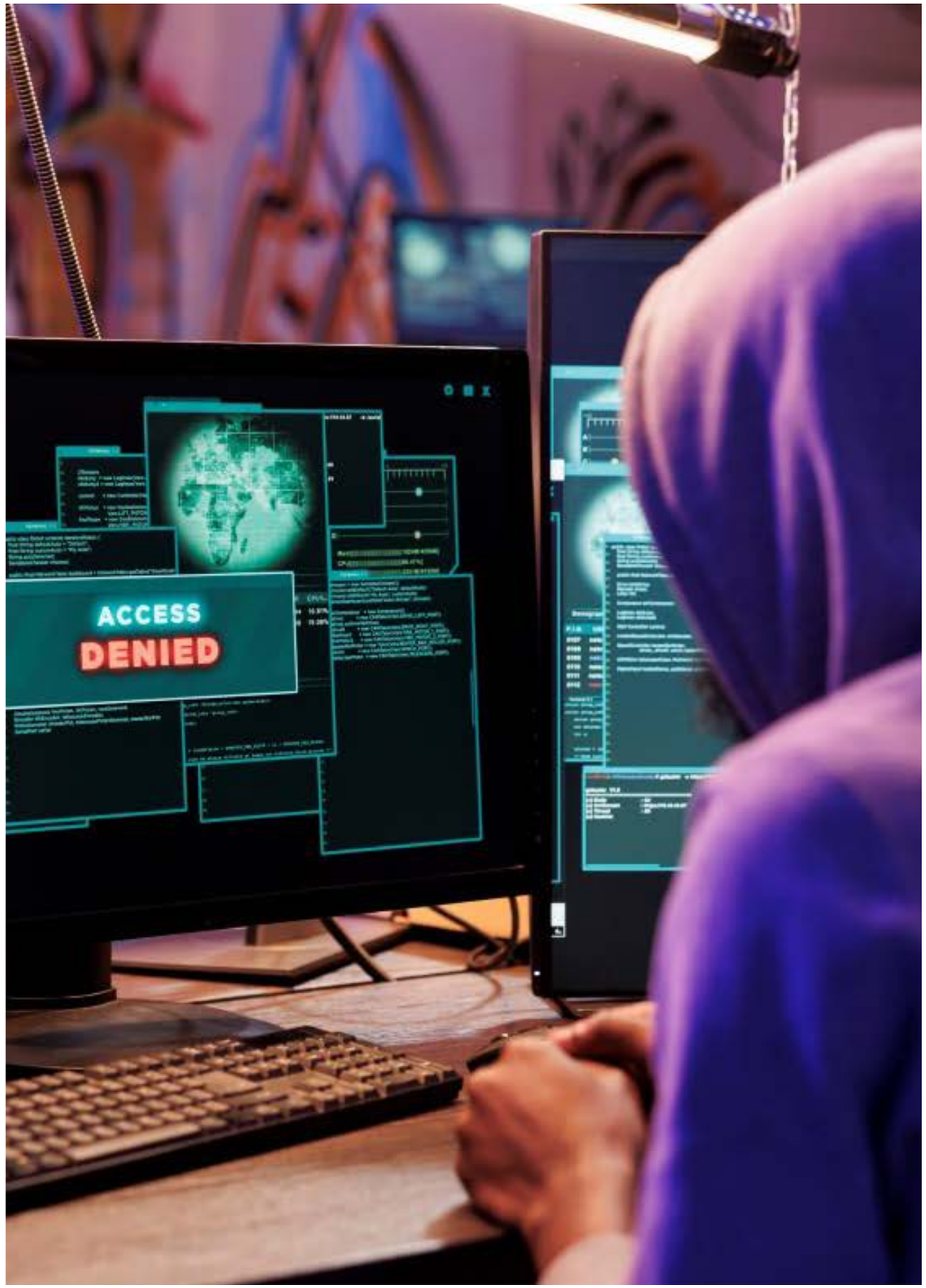


Photo: Freepik

> “A cyber security strategy is only as effective as the people behind it.”

Dr Huo Chong Ling
Senior Lecturer, Software Engineering
School of Science, Engineering & Technology

Photo: RMIT

Education remains the long-term lever. According to Dr Ling, the critical shortage of skilled professionals is the biggest weakness in Vietnam’s cyber security infrastructure.

As of 2023, there were fewer than 4,000 professionals in the field, which Dr Ling considers insufficient to meet the growing demands posed by increasing cyber threats.

“A cyber security strategy is only as effective as the people behind it. Without a sufficiently skilled workforce, even the most well-funded initiatives and advanced technologies will fall short in defending organisations against evolving cyber threats,” he said, adding that universities will play a crucial role by fostering research and developing skilled professionals.

While Vietnam has made notable progress, including achieving a Tier 1 ranking in the 2024 Global Cyber Security Index by the International Telecommunication Union, the work is far from finished.

“We’re on the right track, but the pace must be accelerated,” said Dr Ling. “Cyber security is not just about protection, it’s about enabling the digital future Vietnam is aiming for.”

Story: Ngoc Hoang

Photo: mangpor2004 – stock.adobe.com

Section 2 Innovation and technology for impact

Vietnam's path to becoming a regional startup powerhouse

What will power Vietnam's next economic leap? According to two RMIT experts, the answer lies in startups, as entrepreneurship has the power to reshape Vietnam and position it as Southeast Asia's next innovation powerhouse.

A flourishing startup nation

Vietnam's vision to become a startup hub is not a distant dream. With over 4,000 innovative startups, including "unicorns" valued at over US$1 billion such as MoMo and Sky Mavis, the country is building real capacity for innovation-led growth by 2050.

"Despite a later start compared to regional peers, Vietnam's startup ecosystem has emerged as a dynamic force," said Dr Nguyen Thi Minh Thu, Senior Program Manager for Entrepreneurship at RMIT Vietnam. "It's driven by a young, tech-savvy population and supportive government policies."

In a country that is advancing toward a high-income status, entrepreneurship is more than an economic lever. It's an opportunity for young people to create their own future and for everyday problems to be solved by homegrown ideas.

In that future, a high school graduate in Lao Cai province might create an AI-based tool to help small shop owners track sales and inventory with just a smartphone photo. A young mother in Can Tho could launch a digital marketplace connecting local artisans to global buyers without ever leaving her home. What once seemed unrealistic are now possible outcomes if Vietnam builds the right environment for innovation.

Cities like Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi are already thriving in industries such as fintech and

> **"Despite a later start compared to regional peers, Vietnam's startup ecosystem has emerged as a dynamic force."**
>
> **Dr Nguyen Thi Minh Thu**
> Senior Program Manager, Entrepreneurship
> *The Business School*

blockchain, helped by initiatives like the Vietnam National Innovation Centre and National Program 844. The ecosystem also benefits from large domestic market opportunities, rising venture capital investments, and global trade shifts, according to Dr Justin Xavier, Senior Manager, International & Projects at The Business School, RMIT Vietnam.

Still, challenges remain. “Startups face a shortage of qualified talent and scaled ventures. More investment in education and policies to attract investors and entrepreneurs is also needed,” said Dr Xavier.

Where Vietnam’s startups could go next

By 2050, Vietnam’s startup landscape is expected to transform in ways that reflect a broader shift toward a knowledge-based economy. Dr Thu outlines several forces driving this evolution – demographic change, digital advancements, and the country’s push toward sustainability.

“This transformation will create opportunities for startups in many industries such as e-commerce, AI, fintech, edtech, healthtech, and agritech,” she said. “Vietnam’s pledge for net-zero emissions by 2050 will also drive startups toward energy efficiency and sustainable practices.”

Dr Thu anticipates a future where the private sector becomes the backbone of Vietnam’s economy, with startups leading the way. This aligns with the Politburo’s Resolution No. 68 announced in May 2025, which envisions the private sector contributing over 60 per cent of Vietnam’s GDP by 2045.

“By 2050, if we could see private conglomerates rival regional giants, driving projects like high-speed rail or digital infrastructure, and integrating deeply into global supply chains, that would be a transformative leap. It’s the promise of a self-reliant, dynamic Vietnam built on internal strength rather than external reliance,” Dr Thu said.

Building the right conditions for growth

To make this future possible, structural changes are needed. “Vietnam must strengthen intellectual property laws to protect startup innovation and attract venture capital,” said Dr Thu. “Export incentives and trade support can help local startups integrate into global supply chains.”

Building a stronger ecosystem is also critical. “More access to seed funding, mentorship and incubators is needed to grow future unicorns,” she said. “We also need entrepreneurship embedded in education, and more collaboration between the ecosystem stakeholders, especially academia and industry.”

At RMIT, these ideas are already being put into practice. Through study programs focused on entrepreneurship and innovation, the University is helping students build essential skills and an entrepreneurial mindset.

In 2024, RMIT launched SPARK Hub, offering its students, alumni and the wider community a supportive ecosystem to grow and transform their startup ideas into reality.

Dr Xavier, SPARK Hub’s lead, shares that students have access to mentorship, resources, and networking opportunities through the Hub. It also runs competitions and incubation experience activities so students can apply their learning in practice. By giving students early exposure to startup thinking, the Hub empowers more young people to test ideas, build confidence, and turn creativity into action whether or not they launch a company right away.

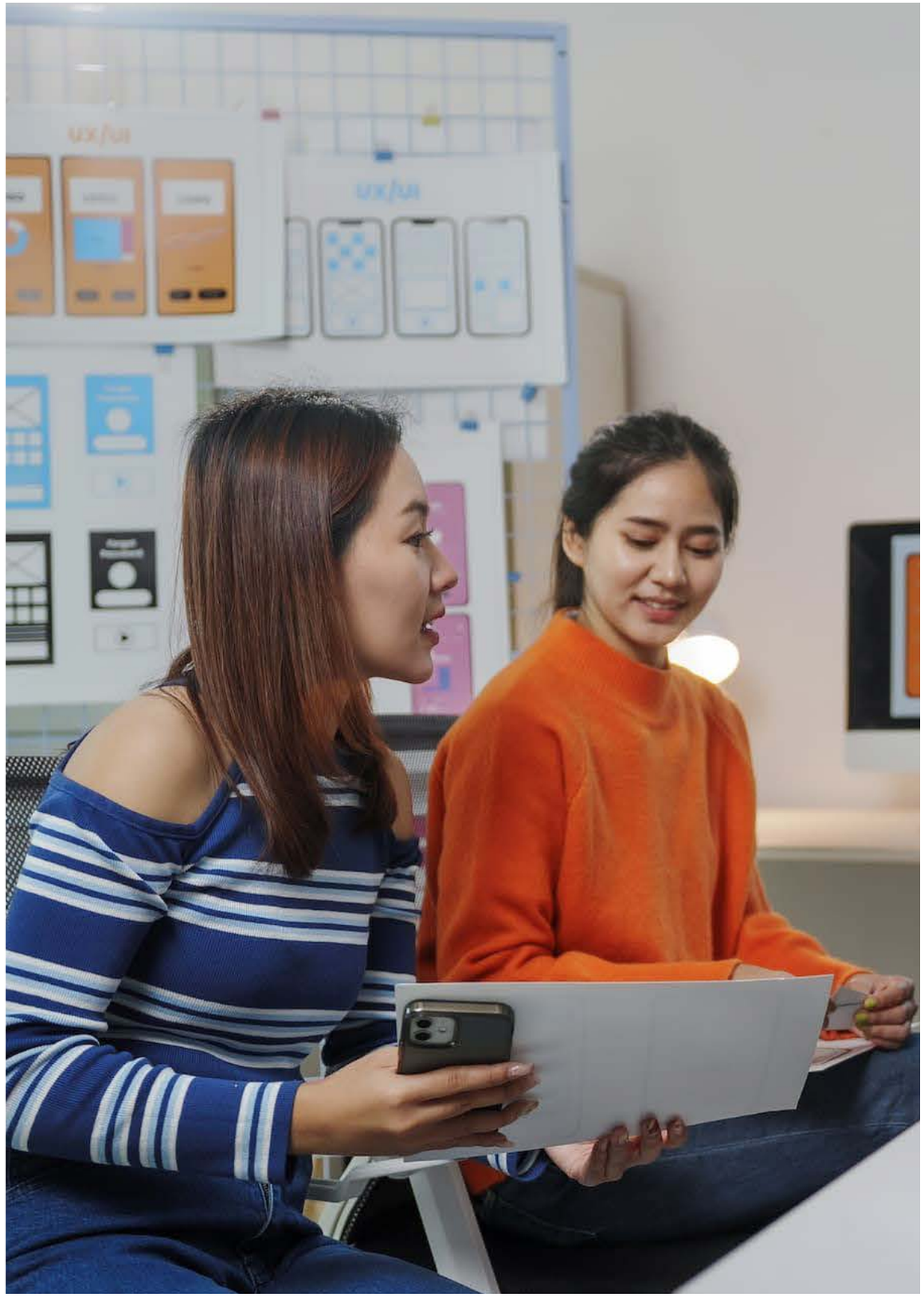


Photo: Crystal – stock.adobe.com

“This comprehensive approach not only equips students with valuable skills but also strengthens Vietnam's startup ecosystem by nurturing a new generation of entrepreneurs ready to compete on the global stage,” he said.

A future powered by local innovation

Looking ahead to 2050, both RMIT experts see entrepreneurship as a pillar of Vietnam’s national development and a pathway to economic resilience.

“The shift to a model where private startups lead in innovation, technology, and global competitiveness is such an exciting vision,” Dr Thu said.

Dr Xavier is inspired by the energy and creativity he sees in Vietnam’s youth. “The most powerful aspect is the combination of a young, tech-savvy population and a rapidly evolving tech ecosystem. The entrepreneurial spirit and resilience of Vietnamese startups position the country as a rising star in the global startup scene.”

And his message to aspiring founders?

“Embrace a mindset of continuous learning and adaptability. The startup world is ever-changing. Stay curious, seek out a mentor, and be ready to pivot when needed.”

Dr Thu added, “Prioritise innovation, problem solving, and resilience. Build something that can withstand change and make sustainability your focus.”

Story: Ngoc Hoang

Photo: RMIT

“The entrepreneurial spirit and resilience of Vietnamese startups position the country as a rising star in the global startup scene.”

Dr Justin Xavier
Senior Manager, International & Projects
The Business School

In 2050: Your doctor could be AI

Scan or click here to watch the companion video for this article.

Vietnam's healthcare faces growing pressure from a lack of doctors, lack of facilities and an aging population. As AI advances, the country must choose whether to lead or lag in healthcare innovation.

Photo:
Toowongsa – stock.adobe.com

The global healthcare workforce crisis is deepening, with a projected shortfall of 11 million workers by 2030. Closer to home, Vietnam faces its own challenges: there are only 12.5 doctors per 10,000 people; its healthcare system is strained by aging demographics; and there is unequal access across urban and low-resource communities.

In this article, Dr Thuy Nguyen, Senior Lecturer in Artificial Intelligence at RMIT Vietnam, shares a bold vision for how AI could transform Vietnam's healthcare system by mid-century.

With deep expertise in machine learning and AI in healthcare, Dr Thuy examines how AI, quantum computing, and robotics could revolutionise prevention, diagnostics, and access, particularly for underserved communities. Her insights offer a compelling glimpse into what healthcare might look like in 2050: smarter, fairer, more connected and more sustainable than ever before.

Photo: Toowongsa – stock.adobe.com

The pressure building inside Vietnam's healthcare system

Vietnam's healthcare system is on the cusp of transformation. While urban centres benefit from growing digital infrastructure and specialist hospitals, many low-resource areas still face a shortage of skilled professionals and basic services. This divide is real but not irreversible.

"Artificial intelligence is emerging as a powerful equaliser. It has the potential to support diagnosis, streamline patient care, and extend the reach of medical services beyond traditional clinic walls," said Dr Thuy. "It should be seen not only as a tool, but as part of the healthcare workforce of the future, helping to reduce the burden on medical staff, and extend access to remote areas."

Vietnam is still in the early stages of AI adoption in health. Applications include image-based diagnostics in radiology and pathology, with pilot projects detecting diseases such as tuberculosis and cancer. Telemedicine is expanding, connecting local clinics with central hospitals for assisting diagnosis, consultations and training.

Challenges remain. Medical data is fragmented, lacks standardisation and is not readily shared, limiting AI model performance. Infrastructure gaps, regulatory uncertainty, and a shortage of AI-literate healthcare workers continue to slow progress. Trust is another hurdle as many patients hesitate to rely on AI systems for diagnosis.

Still, momentum is building. In Vietnam, AI has already been piloted in disease screening and diagnosis through projects funded by the National Foundation for Science and Technology Development and a number of international collaborations. Telemedicine is shifting from a pandemic necessity to a long-term solution linking expertise to where it's needed most.

What could health care look like in 2050?

Over the next 25 years, AI is expected to evolve from a support tool to a proactive partner in care. Dr Thuy believes that breakthroughs in quantum computing, robotics and hyperspectral imaging, combined with AI, will advance healthcare far beyond today's capabilities.

Quantum computing will accelerate drug discovery and personalised treatments. Hyperspectral imaging will enhance proactive, non-invasive diagnostics with highly accurate and personalised treatment. Combined with AI, these technologies can bring better prevention, early detection and targeted care even to remote regions.

AI will monitor patient health, predict risks and support tailored prevention plans. Robotic systems will automate repetitive tasks and assist with complex procedures, allowing doctors to focus on human-centred care.

"We may not be far from a future where virtual hospitals powered by AI deliver quality care across distances."

Dr Thuy Nguyen
Senior Lecturer, Artificial Intelligence
School of Science, Engineering & Technology

“We may not be far from a future where virtual hospitals powered by AI deliver quality care across distances,” said Dr Thuy. “But technology alone isn’t enough. We must also invest in training, building reliable framework and trust for equitable access.”

Infrastructure, education and thoughtful implementation will be critical. AI should complement, not replace, healthcare professionals. Doctors will remain essential - not only for their clinical skills but also as humane, responsible and ethical stewards of machine-generated insights.

Equipping Vietnam for a healthier tomorrow

To make the most of AI’s potential, Vietnam needs systemic change. Dr Thuy emphasises the importance of investment in human resources, digital infrastructure and innovation. Clear and robust regulation to ensure safety, privacy and interoperability to facilitate healthcare transformation with AI is vital.

Without action, the risk is a deepening divide - where only wealthier patients benefit from AI. A national AI healthcare fund could support innovation, trials and upgrades, especially in under-resourced areas. Insurance policies should be updated to cover AI-assisted diagnostics and remote care to ensure inclusivity.

The private sector must contribute by co-developing solutions, localising global innovations, and scaling access. International collaboration will help bring in technological expertise and investment.

“We need a whole-of-society effort - one that brings together government, industry and universities - to ensure AI in healthcare doesn’t become a privilege for the few,” Dr Thuy said.

Education is central. Vietnam must modernise training for both health and tech professionals, offering interdisciplinary programs in AI, health informatics, and digital mental health. Uplifting knowledge and skills through short courses and applied research will help building long-term capability.

Though RMIT Vietnam does not have a medical school at this time, Dr Thuy sees the university playing a strong role. With expertise in AI, emerging technology, and business, RMIT can train AI engineers, researchers, digital health innovators, and policy leaders. It can also serve as a hub for partnerships - connecting researchers, hospitals and startups to pilot AI solutions in real-world settings.

“We do not have a school of medicine, but we do have the expertise to power the digital backbone of future healthcare,” she said. “By investing in people, partnerships and research, we can support a healthcare system that is both innovative and inclusive.”

Beyond policy and infrastructure, Dr Thuy believes it is people who will ultimately determine how AI shapes healthcare. “What excites me most is its potential to make health care more accessible, preventive, personalised and inclusive,” she said. “If I could implement one technology today, it would be an AI-assisted healthcare platform tailored for low-resource communities.”

To the next generation of healthcare leaders, she offers this advice: “Stay visionary yet practical, fostering continuous learning and building resilient systems. Embrace technology with courage, adaptability, interdisciplinary thinking and a mindset of curiosity and collaboration. Those who can bridge AI and medicine, with both empathy and technical fluency, will shape the healthcare systems of the future.”

Story: Quan Dinh H.

Photo:
Luciano – stock.adobe.com

When chips power the nation

Vietnam's emergence as a technology powerhouse may hinge on a tiny component with massive implications: the semiconductor.

Dr Minh Bui, Cluster Lead of Semiconductor and Industry 4.0 Research Cluster at RMIT Vietnam, saw this as a pivotal moment for the country to strengthen its control over critical technologies and advance industrial transformation.

More than assembling – building the brain of modern technology

Vietnam is already home to major players like Intel, Samsung, Qualcomm, Renesas, Synopsys, Marvel and Faraday. By the end of 2024, the semiconductor industry was expected to surpass $6.16 billion. Yet Vietnam remains in the lower rungs of the global semiconductor value chain which is dominated by assembly, testing, and packaging.

"We still don't have local wafer fabrication foundries," Dr Minh said. "That limits our ability to move into the high-value segments like chip design and advanced manufacturing."

The challenges go beyond factories. Vietnam faces shortages in skilled talent, research infrastructure, and specialised logistics, from stable power supplies to chip-grade raw materials. "To become competitive, we need more than just capital investment," he said. "We need comprehensive policies, a strong intellectual property (IP) framework, and a fully integrated ecosystem that supports innovation."

Despite the obstacles, momentum is building. A national steering committee led by the Prime Minister and a strategic plan to train 50,000 semiconductor engineers by 2030 signal high-level commitment. "We are entering a critical phase," Dr Minh said. "With the right moves now, Vietnam can become a serious player in Southeast Asia's semiconductor race."

Designing Vietnam's technology power by 2050

The semiconductor industry serves as the driving force of modern technological progress, fostering innovation across artificial intelligence (AI), internet of thing (IoT), edge and cloud computing, telecommunications, automotive, and consumer electronics.

Vietnam's opportunity lies in supply chain diversification. As geopolitical tensions push companies to seek alternatives to China and Taiwan, the country stands to benefit. "We're seeing more research and development investment, not just assembly," Dr Minh said. Firms like Synopsys and Faraday are ramping up research efforts in fields ranging from medical devices to data centres.

Several frontier technologies are also on the radar. In-memory computing, which could dramatically reduce energy consumption for AI hardware, and quantum chip development for fields like cryptography and pharmaceuticals, are among them.

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When chips power the nation

"We are entering a critical phase. With the right moves now, Vietnam can become a serious player in Southeast Asia's semiconductor race."

Dr Minh Bui
Cluster Lead, Semiconductor and Industry 4.0 Research Cluster
School of Science, Engineering & Technology

“AI-driven chip design tools from companies like Cadence and Siemens are also redefining how fast and cost-effectively chips can be made,” he added.

Still, transformation won’t be automatic. “This is a high-stakes game,” he warned. “Without real investment in talent, infrastructure, and IP protection, we risk missing the window.”

To succeed, Dr Minh believed Vietnam must take a systems-level approach. “It’s not enough to train engineers. We need a coordinated strategy where government, industry, and universities work together.”

Assembling Vietnam’s semiconductor future

Government must lead on incentives and infrastructure. “Beyond tax breaks, subsidies, and grants to attract semiconductor fabrication and R&D investments, we need to invest in a national semiconductor fabrication foundry and enhance the reliability of electricity, water supply, and logistics infrastructure to support high-tech semiconductor research and development activities and manufacturing,” Dr Minh said. Legal frameworks for intellectual property protection and technology transfer agreements with leading global companies like TSMC or GlobalFoundries are equally critical.

Businesses also have a central role to play, especially local companies. “Promoting partnerships between local enterprises, such as Viettel and FPT, and global semiconductor leaders, including Intel, Samsung, Cadence, Synopsys, TSMC, is essential for enabling knowledge transfer and driving technological advancement,” Dr Minh suggested.

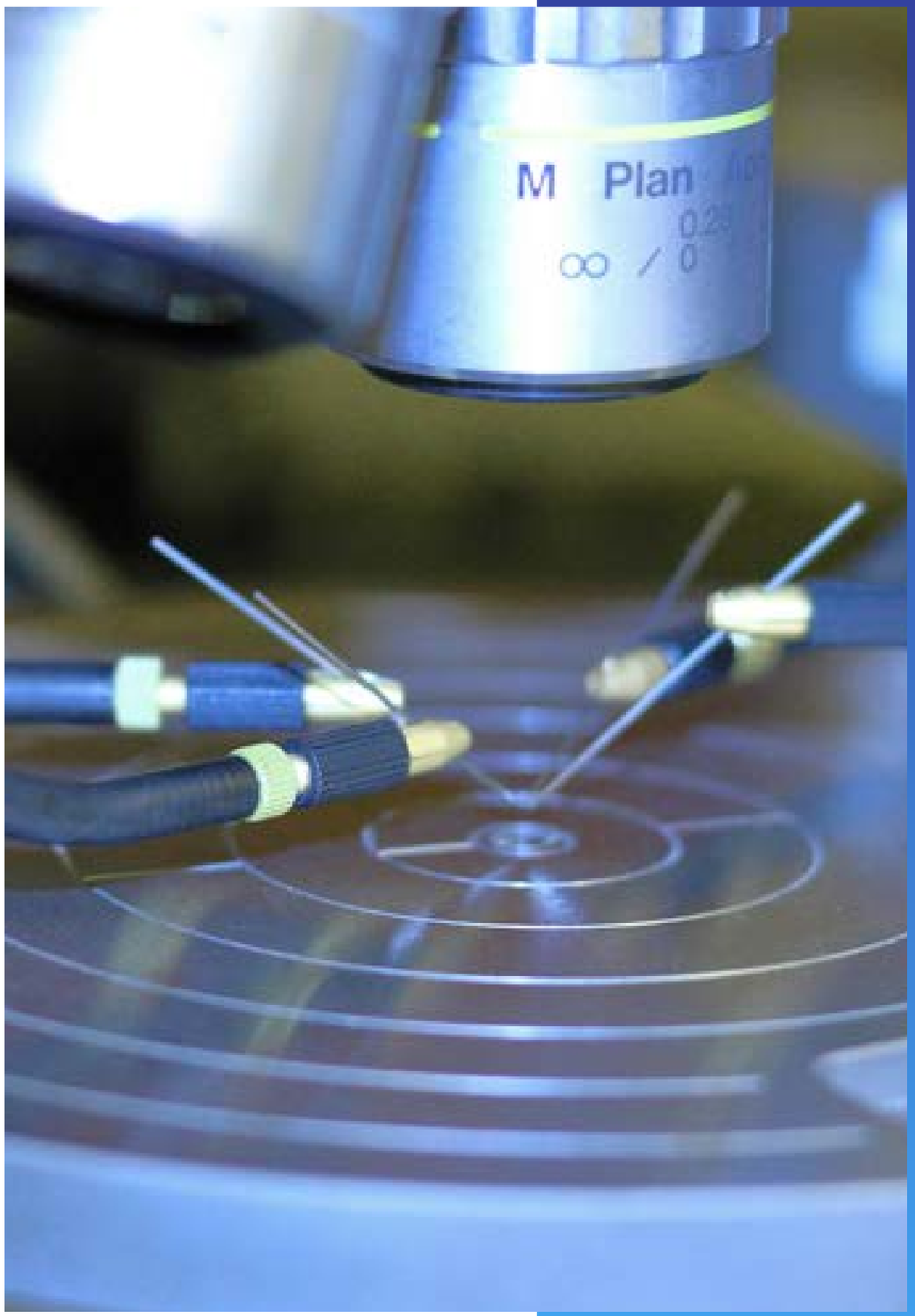
Education is perhaps the key player. “We need to embed chip design, microelectronics, and semiconductor physics into our curricula,” Dr Minh said. “But more than that, we need strong ties between academia and industry to create job-ready graduates.”

RMIT Vietnam is well-positioned to support the country’s semiconductor transformation through education, industry collaboration, and knowledge exchange. “By offering specialised academic programs, fostering partnerships with global and local semiconductor leaders, and hosting knowledge-sharing events, we can play a pioneering role in developing Vietnam’s high-tech talent and innovation ecosystem.”

For Dr Minh, the path forward is both exciting and urgent. “We have the momentum. Now we must turn ambition into action.” His advice to young professionals was “to embrace continuous learning and adaptability. The semiconductor industry evolves rapidly and those who remain curious, humble and innovative will play a leading role in shaping Vietnam’s semiconductor future”.

As Vietnam looks ahead to 2050, its semiconductor journey may be less visible than other technology shifts, but no less critical. In this race, even the smallest chips can drive the biggest change.

Story: Ha Hoang



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Section 2

When AI walks among us

Vietnam is quietly becoming one of Asia's most promising robotics hubs.

Dr Hai-Nguyen (Hann) Nguyen, a lecturer in Robotics and Mechatronics Engineering from RMIT Vietnam, believed the nation is on the brink of a transformation -- one that could redefine how society works, lives, and learns.

From factory floors to everyday life

Since 2017, Vietnam has seen a rapid uptick in robot adoption, driven by free trade agreements, surging foreign investment, and its expanding role in global manufacturing. The country now rivals regional neighbours like Malaysia and Thailand in robot density and was ranked the world's seventh-largest market for industrial robots.

But there's a catch. "Adoption is still concentrated in foreign-owned factories," Dr Nguyen said. "Vietnamese SMEs and other sectors are falling behind, often due to the high costs and complexity of robotics."

While firms like VinFast and Vinamilk are exploring robotics, most local enterprises lack access to capital, talent, or ready-to-use technology. Global leaders in robotics, from the US to China to the UK, are pursuing either deep research and development or targeted sectoral adoption. For Vietnam, a hybrid path seems most viable.

"We need to adopt proven technologies while building local capabilities," Dr Nguyen said. "This dual-track strategy is what will enable us to leap forward."

Despite the hurdles, the pace of development is quickening. Robots are moving beyond pick-and-place tasks on factory lines. Humanoid robots now navigate crowded streets, perform basic cooking preparation or even execute complex movements like parkour, and some can learn tasks by watching YouTube.

"This isn't science fiction anymore," Dr Nguyen said. "We're seeing the early signs of robots stepping into human environments -- and staying there."

"There's a misconception that robotics is just about hardware. It's actually about full-stack engineering, from embedded systems to artificial intelligence. Our educational and policy ecosystems are just beginning to catch up."

Looking toward 2050, Dr Nguyen expected AI to be inseparable from its physical forms. "Ask someone what AI is in 25 years, and they'll likely point to a robot helping them in their home or workplace." In Vietnam, this could mean robots tending to rice fields, assisting the elderly, or streamlining logistics in remote regions.

The impact on the workforce will be complex. Automation replaced around 66,800 low-skilled jobs in Vietnam between 2018 and 2022 but also created over 154,000 high-skilled positions.

“That’s a clear signal,” Dr Nguyen said. “If we invest right, robots won’t just take jobs, they’ll make better ones.”

Vietnam’s 25-year leap starts now

To prepare for the robotic future, Vietnam must chart a strategic, inclusive path. “While global powers are investing heavily in either deep research and development or sector-specific innovation, Vietnam’s strength may lie in a hybrid approach -- adopting proven technologies while nurturing homegrown capabilities,” Dr Nguyen explained. “This isn’t just about catching up; it’s about aligning with our national strengths and industrial ambitions.”

The Vietnamese government has already recognised robotics as a strategic priority, embedding it into national innovation plans. However, bridging the so-called “valley of death” for hardware start-ups, where promising ideas often stall due to lack of funding, remains a critical challenge. Targeted support, including incentives and infrastructure investment, will be vital to sustain momentum.

Private-sector innovation must also rise to the occasion. Robotics-as-a-Service (RaaS) models could help SMEs overcome high upfront costs, while partnerships with universities and research institutes can accelerate the development of locally adapted solutions.

Education reform is equally urgent. “We need engineers who can design, program, and deploy robots -- true full-stack roboticists,” Dr Nguyen urged.

“Full stack roboticists are individuals who are not only proficient in hardware and software, but also deeply grounded in the foundational sciences that underpin robotics,” Dr Nguyen explained. “We need a new generation of engineers who can transform ideas into intelligent machines that function effectively in the real world.”

Yet, most current programs still teach hardware and software in isolation. The next step is to integrate these disciplines through hands-on projects, internships, and cross-disciplinary learning. This holistic approach is essential to cultivating the next generation of roboticists.

With institutions like RMIT Vietnam leading the way, we are well-positioned to drive this transformation -- empowering students to become innovators who can build intelligent systems that thrive in real-world environments.

As a researcher and educator, Dr Nguyen felt the stakes are personal. “This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity for Vietnam,” he said. “We’re not only catching up, we’re shaping how robotics will be used in Vietnam as well as other emerging markets.”

To young people considering their future, his message is simple: be bold. “Robotics may be demanding, but it promises rewarding experiences and meaningful opportunities to impact society positively. If you want to build the future, this is your moment,” he said.

Story: Ha Hoang

Photo: RMIT

“We need a new generation of engineers who can transform ideas into intelligent machines that function effectively in the real world.”

Dr Hai-Nguyen (Hann) Nguyen
Lecturer, Robotics and Mechatronics Engineering
School of Science, Engineering & Technology

Building a financially inclusive Vietnam by 2050

RMIT experts believe the continued development of fintech will offer a path to full financial inclusion, where no one is left behind in the country's transition to a digital economy.

Photo: N Felix - stock.adobe.com

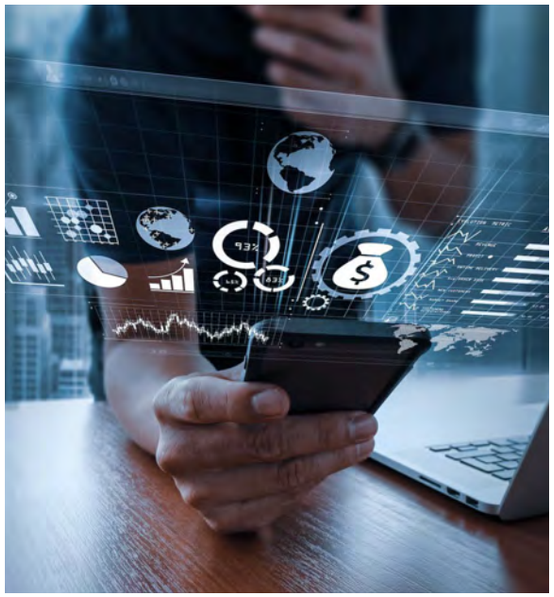

Photo: everythingpossible - stock.adobe.com

Imagine a future where anyone in Vietnam – from farmers in the Mekong Delta to traditional artisans in mountainous areas — can access the financial tools they need to earn, save, insure, and invest. That's the vision RMIT experts say fintech could help realise by 2050, if innovation continues to move hand in hand with trust, education, and inclusion.

Financial inclusion is a fundamental goal in Vietnam's long-term development. As stipulated in the National Financial Inclusion Strategy until 2025 with a vision to 2030, it means providing people and enterprises with safe and convenient access to affordable financial services, such as money transfer, payment, credit, savings, to insurance. The focus is on people from low-income and vulnerable groups, and enterprises operating on a micro, small, or medium scale.

Major strides have been made in expanding financial inclusion in Vietnam over the past decade. In 2015, only about 31 per cent of adults had a payment account. That number rose to over 87 per cent by 2024. Official reports also show that since 2020, cashless transactions have increased by over 34 percent, with many public sector payments now fully cashless.

According to Dr Huy Pham, a senior lecturer in Finance at RMIT University, fintech innovations have significantly contributed to improving financial access in Vietnam. "The success of mobile banking, QR code payments, and e-wallets has been truly remarkable," he says.

With over 30 million active accounts as of March 2025, e-wallets such as MoMo and ZaloPay have provided a convenient way for people to conduct a plethora of transactions. Meanwhile, mobile money services (wherein people can use their mobile phone subscription accounts to make small-value payments) have reached 9.6 million users by the end of 2024, 72% of whom live in rural areas.

"Such innovations have been instrumental in getting more people in remote and rural areas to participate in the digital economy," Dr Huy says.

New technologies, new opportunities

Dr Huy and his fellow Fintech-Crypto research co-lead at RMIT, Dr Phong Nguyen, see blockchain and AI as having strong potential to support financial inclusion in the decades to come.

"Technologies will continue to play a key role in shaping the future of financial access, especially with the rapid adoption of AI and blockchain, which the Government has identified as new growth areas," says Dr Huy.

Considering the government's National Blockchain Strategy and ongoing development of a regulatory framework for cryptocurrency and digital assets, the RMIT researchers believe decentralised finance (DeFi) will have a growing role in expanding financial services, offering new models such as staking, lending, and liquidity provision.

Dr Phong, who is a lecturer in Blockchain Enabled Business, explains that blockchain and the DeFi models, if managed and regulated properly, will greatly enhance financial inclusion in Vietnam.

"As they leverage decentralised databases and algorithms, these models offer alternative financial services and products without the involvement of traditional banks. They allow anyone with an internet connection and a smartphone to access and use them," he says.

In addition, Dr Phong anticipates that AI will continue to play an important role in reinforcing financial innovations such as mobile apps, online payment platforms, and DeFi models.

"AI will allow fintech firms to enhance customer experience by offering features that are customised for a wide range of users with different backgrounds and levels of experience with technologies," he says.

Trust, education, and evolving regulation

The growing trajectory of technologies and innovations in finance will allow more people to get access to financial services, thus improving the quality of life in Vietnam in the decades to come.

"Strong public education about a wide range of cyber risks and attacks related to digital financial services and products is critical to ensure sustainable growth in both fintech and financial inclusion in Vietnam."

Dr Phong Nguyen
Lecturer, Blockchain Enabled Business
The Business School

"However, as people are exposed to technologies, they are also vulnerable to greater risks of cyber attacks where they could lose access to their accounts and money," Dr Phong warned.

"Strong public education about a wide range of cyber risks and attacks related to digital financial services and products is critical to ensure sustainable growth in both fintech and financial inclusion in Vietnam."

Meanwhile, Dr Huy highlights the importance of improving regulations, commending the recent frameworks issued by the government to pilot various innovative fintech products.

For instance, Vietnam has begun a two-year regulatory sandbox for selected fintech services, including peer-to-peer (P2P) lending, credit scoring, and open banking data sharing, from 1 July 2025, following the release of government's Decree 94/2025/ND-CP.

Photo: thodonal - stock.adobe.com

"Technologies will continue to play a key role in shaping the future of financial access, especially with the rapid adoption of AI and blockchain."

Dr Huy Pham
Senior Lecturer, Finance
The Business School

While this is a positive step, Dr Huy notes the current limitations. “The sandbox only permits companies licensed by the State Bank of Vietnam to conduct P2P lending during the pilot, which may result in a limited number of companies joining,” he says.

He recommends the government speed up the selection process of companies and expand the range of products that are allowed – especially in the context of the upcoming Law on Digital Technology Industry and resolutions regarding international financial centres and crypto assets.

The long view

Looking ahead to the next 25 years, both experts remain optimistic.

“Technology adoption and technology-related education are key for long-term financial inclusion, and I have seen great development of both elements,” says Dr Phong.

“Many people, especially young generations, are very proficient at using a wide range of digital platforms and financial services, and they are eager to learn about its implications across business and daily life.”

Dr Huy agrees, pointing to the accelerating role of AI as another highlight. “Technology, especially AI, is growing at a rate we have never experienced before and we can expect AI to be deep-rooted in our daily life in the next two or three decades.”

“It will remove many barriers – including knowledge, language and technology – and allow Vietnamese people to access a wider range of financial services,” he says.

Story: Ngoc Hoang

Photo: Pexels

Section 3

EDUCATION AND HUMAN CAPITAL

Photo: RMIT

Vietnam's smart shift in education

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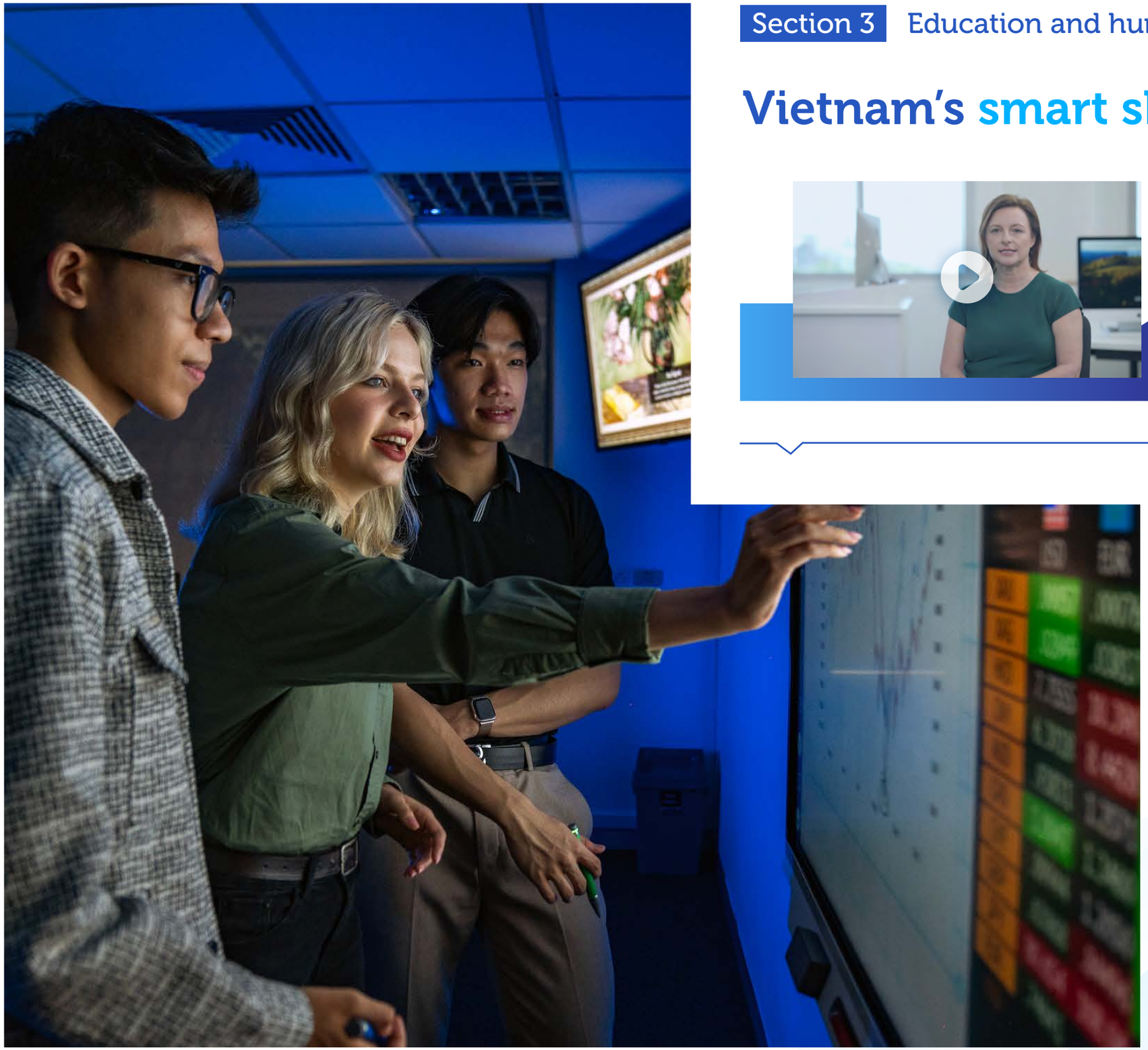
to watch the companion video for this article.



Vietnam is emerging as a surprising leader in educational innovation.

For Ms Sasha Stubbs, Manager of Learning Design at RMIT Vietnam, the nation's tech-savvy youth, strong digital adoption, and deep cultural respect for learning signal "a tremendous opportunity to reimagine how we learn and how technology can extend and enhance learning experiences."

Building the infrastructure of future-ready education

While Vietnam is still emerging in the field of learning innovation, momentum is undeniable. By 2024, learning management system (LMS) platforms such as Moodle and Blackboard were widely adopted across Vietnamese universities as part of the national digital transformation strategy in higher education. "Vietnam is a newcomer in the field of learning innovation, with significant untapped potential in blended and online learning design," Ms Stubbs explained.

Photo: RMIT

She has seen the transformation firsthand. “When I first came to Vietnam four years ago, I worried about recruiting learning designers locally. Today, I'm proud to say, except for myself, the RMIT Vietnam Learning Design team is 100 percent Vietnamese, and they are the most talented and dedicated professionals I've ever had the privilege to work with.”

The rise of grassroots EdTech firms like OOOLab, the emergence of a national learning design community, and programs like Hanoi University of Science and Technology’s Bachelor of Education Technology show the field’s growing credibility. Still, Ms Stubbs noted persistent challenges, such as unequal digital infrastructure and entrenched teacher-centred models. “The education system has traditionally been teacher-centred, which has created resistance to innovative methodologies. However, this is changing as younger educators enter the field.”

Vietnam’s EdTech market is already valued at over $360 million. With its youthful workforce and strong digital adoption, Ms Stubbs saw an opportunity to build a globally competitive hub for learning design and educational services, especially as institutions in Australia and the UK seek more cost-effective outsourcing solutions.

Designing for lifelong learning and international impact

As Vietnam’s economy moves toward high-tech manufacturing, automation, and AI, learning itself must transform. “It will no longer be enough to complete a single degree and be guaranteed a lifetime of work,” Ms Stubbs said. “Lifelong learning will become a necessary and normal part of our lives.”

This means universities must shift to modular, flexible offerings like micro credentials and stackable degrees. Ms Stubbs believed Vietnamese institutions will follow the lead of top international universities already pioneering such formats. “Vietnamese universities will likely start offering smaller, more flexible types of learning to suit working professionals and people at different stages of life.”

Blended learning, combining online flexibility with in-person engagement, is rapidly gaining traction. At RMIT Vietnam, over 200 courses have undergone digital transformation.

“Our three Platinum LearnX awards for Innovation, Learning Design and Online Learning, and international conference presentations are a testament to the quality of our work,” she said. “It demonstrates the exceptional potential and quality of Vietnamese talent in learning design.”

Ms Stubbs sees AI as a transformative force, not just for students but also for educators. “AI can support learning designers by automating routine tasks, helping to generate initial content drafts, creating interactive simulations, and personalising learning experiences at scale.”

Through secure tools like RMIT’s in-house AI agent “Val” and collaborative initiatives like the “GenAI for Course Creation” project, Vietnamese teams are showing they can not only keep pace, but lead. “This international collaboration demonstrated how Vietnamese learning designers bring valuable expertise and capabilities that match and even exceed those of their counterparts in more established markets.”

Ms Stubbs also pointed to the rise of “third space” careers – learning designers, technologists, and digital content specialists – as a growing professional frontier. “Vietnam, with its young, dedicated, English speaking, and technically skilled workforce, could

Photo: RMIT

become a hub for these professionals, serving both domestic and international markets."

The global Online Program Management (OPM) market is projected to reach $7.7 billion by 2025. Ms Stubbs saw this as a major opportunity: "Vietnam has the potential to develop learning technology companies and design studios that provide outsourced services at competitive rates while ensuring high quality."

For that potential to be realised, systemic support is needed. Ms Stubbs called for government incentives for EdTech start-ups, formal recognition of learning design roles, and more investment in training centres at universities. "Educators urgently need support to transition from traditional lecture-based teaching methods to more student-centred, active, blended learning approaches," she said.

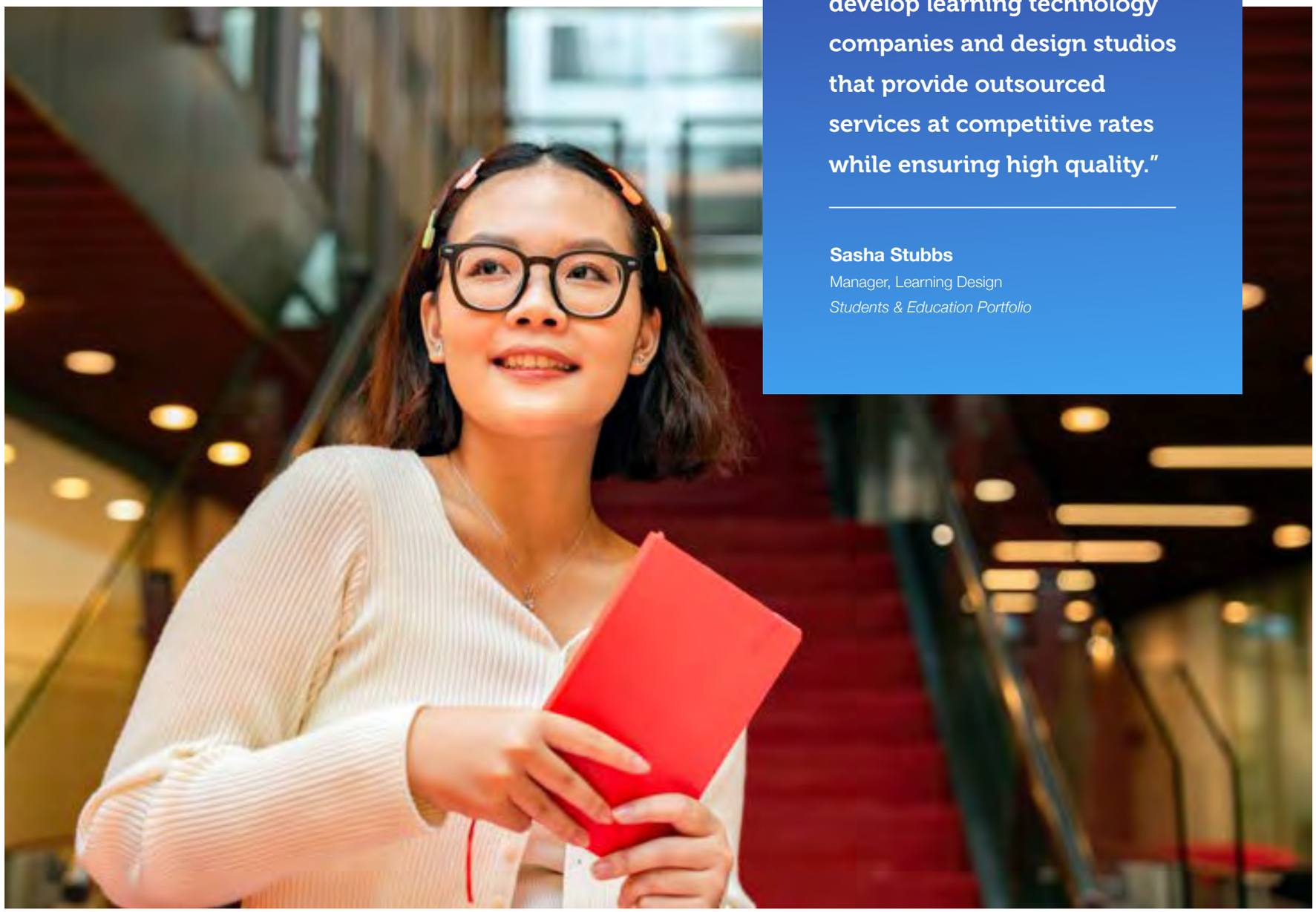
RMIT is playing a key role in leading this transformation. Its teaching and learning forums, like the Higher Education Horizons event, and Communities of Practice bring together universities across Vietnam to collaborate on digital transformation. "Our Learning Design team regularly presents at these events, sharing our experiences and innovations with colleagues from across Vietnam," she said.

A generation ready to shape the future of education

What excites Ms Stubbs most? The prospect of building a new profession in Vietnam that merges creativity, pedagogy and technology. "I'm particularly enthusiastic about Vietnam's potential to become a hub for learning design expertise that serves not only our own institutions but also creates economic opportunities through providing services internationally."

Her message to students and young professionals is direct: "Seriously consider careers in the emerging 'third space' between traditional teaching and technology. You can help shape the future of education here rather than simply following models developed elsewhere."

Story: Ha Hoang



"Vietnam has the potential to develop learning technology companies and design studios that provide outsourced services at competitive rates while ensuring high quality."

Sasha Stubbs
Manager, Learning Design
Students & Education Portfolio

Photo: RMIT

Beyond borders and blackboards

Scan or click here to watch the companion video for this article.

Photo: RMIT

Transnational education is reshaping how Vietnam prepares for its future.

For RMIT University's leaders, it goes beyond delivering foreign degrees; it's about building a globally connected, locally grounded education system that equips students to lead in a rapidly changing world.

Vietnam's turning point in global education

Vietnam has made significant strides in internationalising its higher education system. With over 400 joint training programs and a growing number of international students, transnational education (TNE) has become a defining feature of its tertiary landscape. "We're seeing Vietnam move from being a recipient of global education to a co-creator in global knowledge ecosystems," RMIT Vietnam Dean of Students Associate Professor Seng Kiat Kok said.

Government policies such as the Education Development Strategy until 2030, with a vision to 2045, reflect this ambition, focusing on international curriculum design, research collaboration, and global degree recognition. Yet challenges remain. Internally, bureaucratic processes and outdated infrastructure slow innovation. Externally, shifting attitudes toward globalisation and travel can impact student mobility and talent flows.

Despite these hurdles, Vietnam is well-positioned for transformation. "Vietnam's youthful, energetic population and upward economic trajectory create the right conditions to rethink how we educate for the future," Director of Academic Experience and Success at RMIT Vietnam, Mr Glen O'Grady said. "And transnational education will play a critical role in that."

RMIT's approach reflects this new paradigm. Its 3A pedagogy -- Applied, Active, and Authentic -- combines cross-disciplinary learning with real-world problem solving. "We believe technical skills alone aren't enough," RMIT Deputy Vice-Chancellor Education and Vice-President, Professor Sherman Young said. "Tomorrow's workforce needs adaptability, leadership, and a global outlook."

A future workforce shaped by collaboration

As Vietnam aims to become a high-income nation by 2045, the demand for a skilled, future-ready workforce is growing fast. But this goes beyond proficiency in STEM. "We need talent that can navigate complexity, be able to work across cultures, and lead in ambiguity," Associate Professor Kok said. That means blending deep technical knowledge with broad, human-centred capabilities.

Vietnam's ambitions in high-speed rail, AI, semiconductors, and digital transformation will require advanced, multi-skilled professionals. The World Bank notes that investment in high-value sectors must go hand-in-hand with the development of a quality workforce and responsive training systems.

This requires more than top-down policy. Universities must work closely with industry to co-design curricula, ensure relevance, and facilitate knowledge exchange. "Partnership is not optional, it's essential," Mr O'Grady said. "Employers must become co-educators."

RMIT Vietnam's flexible curriculum architecture allows students to mix majors and minors across fields, building interdisciplinary profiles tailored to future jobs. Programs also feature industry-partnered projects, international case studies, and mobility experiences that expose students to diverse ways of thinking and working.

"Our role is to simulate the environments our graduates will enter," said Professor Young. "That includes rapid technological change, cultural diversity, and social responsibility."

Transnational education, when done right, can act as a bridge between global best practices and local development needs. "It's not about exporting education," Professor Kok emphasised. "It's about contextualising it, delivering global quality in ways that serve local ambitions."

RMIT Vietnam is a clear example. With 25 years of experience, the university is deeply integrated into Vietnam's higher education ecosystem, delivering Australian-accredited degrees while responding to local industry needs and cultural context.

This model strengthens Vietnam-Australia ties and contributes to broader national goals -- from green growth and digital transformation to workforce inclusion and innovation ecosystems. Education already accounts for nearly four percent of Vietnam's GDP, and its strategic value will only grow.

Looking ahead, the team sees even greater integration of TNE into Vietnam's development strategy. That includes expanding access, modernising regulations, and promoting sustainable practices like circular economy training and green industry collaboration. "We can leapfrog outdated systems and build something truly future-oriented," Mr O'Grady said.

What excites these educators most is the scale of opportunity. "Vietnam could become the innovation hub of Southeast Asia," Associate Professor Kok said. "The foundations are in place and what we need now is bold thinking and collaborative action."

Their message to students is clear: see education not just as a personal asset, but as a platform for collective progress. "Be global in mindset, but grounded in community," Professor Young commented. "Lead with purpose."

For young people navigating an unpredictable world, their advice is to look for opportunity in complexity. "Sustainable development doesn't have to come at the expense of growth," Mr O'Grady said. "We can design systems that protect heritage, empower communities, and create high-value jobs."

Transnational education, they argue, is about more than crossing borders; it's about breaking barriers to knowledge, to collaboration, and to a future that belongs to all.

Story: Ha Hoang

Photo: RMIT

Beyond borders and blackboards

"Transnational education is not about exporting education; it's about contextualising it, delivering global quality in ways that serve local ambitions."

Associate Professor Seng Kiat Kok

Dean of Students

Students & Education Portfolio

Section 4

CULTURE AND IDENTITY

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Tradition reimagined for a digital future

Scan or click here

to watch the companion video for this article.

Vietnam's centuries-old textile traditions may hold the key to its future.

Photo: RMIT

Associate Professor (AP) Donna Cleveland, Dean of School of Communication & Design at RMIT Vietnam, believed the country is poised to become a global leader in preserving living culture through innovation, if it chooses the right path now.

From craft villages to global platforms

Vietnam is home to an extraordinary diversity of textile heritage, with each ethnic community preserving its own unique forms of weaving, dyeing, embroidery, and pattern symbolism, including Batik, indigo dyeing, and brocade. These practices are often passed down through generations and form an integral part of local identity, storytelling, and ritual.

But this rich heritage is under threat. Climate change is wiping out plants used for natural dyes. Younger generations are migrating to cities. Globalised fashion trends often strip cultural motifs of meaning while giving little back to the artisans.

Photo: RMIT

Photo: RMIT

“Efforts to preserve traditional crafts are still fragmented and underfunded, with limited access to digital tools or platforms that could aid preservation, storytelling, and market access,” AP Cleveland said.

Vietnamese government programs such as OCOP (One Commune One Product) and museum initiatives have laid a foundation. Yet the key action moving forward is to empower communities to be not only subjects of research but co-researchers, co-authors and co-owners of the processes and platforms that shape their future.

“This work goes beyond preservation,” AP Cleveland said. “It’s also about cultural justice, creativity and shared prosperity.”

Innovation doesn’t erase tradition, it deepens it

In the next 25 years, AP Cleveland envisioned a vibrant fusion of the old and new. “Craft practices will not only survive but they will also evolve, thanks to digital tools and cultural recognition,” she said. Technologies like 3D scanning, AR/VR, and AI-assisted design can help preserve patterns, teach skills, and share stories across generations and borders.

But the biggest shift may not be technological. It will be cultural. “We’ll see a move from top-down preservation to community-led innovation,” AP Cleveland predicted. Artisans will become both guardians of tradition and co-creators of sustainable futures. Storytelling, long seen as a passive tool, will emerge as a powerful research and design method.

As global consumers seek ethical, traceable, and meaningful products, Vietnam’s heritage could meet that demand, especially if blockchain and digital provenance tools are used to protect authenticity. “Craft tourism, design education, and digital marketplaces will grow,” AP Cleveland said. “If we invest now, Vietnam can lead in cultural sustainability.”

A future that honours the past

Building this future will require collaboration at every level. Government must create national frameworks for intangible heritage -- policies that support digital documentation, protect artisan intellectual property, and invest in cultural infrastructure. “We need clear rules around data sovereignty and benefit-sharing,” AP Cleveland said.

For businesses, especially in fashion and design, the opportunity lies in ethical partnerships. “Support shouldn’t be transactional,” she stressed. “It needs to be long-term, transparent, and driven by community goals.” Technological platforms, from mobile storytelling apps to blockchain verification systems, can give artisans more control and visibility.

Education, too, must evolve. It is where these ideas come to life. While policies and platforms lay the groundwork, it’s in the classroom, and beyond, where the next generation begins to shape the future. At RMIT Vietnam, learning doesn’t stay confined to lecture halls. It reaches into villages, into stories, and into the hands of artisans who carry centuries of wisdom. This is where innovation meets empathy, and where students begin to understand that tradition isn’t just something to study, it’s something to live.

“When our students sit with artisans in remote villages, they don’t just learn techniques, they hear stories, witness resilience, and build relationships,” AP Cleveland said. “It’s a transformative experience that shapes not only their design thinking but their values.”

This immersive “studio in the wild” approach helps students see tradition not as a relic, but as a living, breathing source of inspiration and identity.

Photo: RMIT

What excites her most? “Seeing young artisans and designers working together to reimagine tradition, not as something fixed, but as something alive, evolving, and beautiful.” And this is her message to the next generation: “Innovation doesn’t mean erasing the past. It means listening deeply, building trust, and creating with care.”

As Vietnam moves toward 2050, its greatest strength may lie not only in smart factories or AI labs, but in its ability to blend ancient wisdom with new tools -- ensuring tradition thrives in a digital world.

Story: Ha Hoang

“Innovation doesn’t mean erasing the past. It means listening deeply, building trust, and creating with care.”

Associate Professor Donna Cleveland
Dean, School of Communication & Design

Photo: Hanoi Photography - stock.adobe.com

Section 4 Culture and identity

Can smart cities have soul? In Vietnam, culture holds the key.

As Vietnam transitions into a smart society, it risks building faster systems but losing the culture that makes those systems human. "The focus must shift to a holistic digital culture that upholds ethical values, cultural identity, and creative expression," says RMIT's Associate Professor Kok Yoong Lim.

Digitisation of the modern Vietnamese society

Vietnam's digital habits are evolving fast. From calling an electric taxi or paying bills via mobile apps, to checking neighbourhood updates through Zalo chat groups or using online public services, digital lifestyles are seamlessly woven into the Vietnamese urban experience.

The rapid progress of the digital society is largely thanks to widespread internet adoption. According to Statista, the number of internet users in Vietnam rose from 36 million in 2014 to 88 million in 2024, and is projected to surpass 100 million by 2027. But while digital access has grown, the creative economy lags behind, contributing just around 0.6 per cent of the national GDP in 2023. This signals vast untapped potential for growth in the sector.

Most smart city visions have focused on enhancing overall quality of life by leveraging technology – enabling faster transport, smarter systems, and more efficient services. However, without cultural depth, these visions risk becoming "technological shells" – efficient on the surface yet devoid of the humanity that makes cities truly liveable.

As Vietnam strives to become a digital society by 2030 and a high-income country by 2050, it has an opportunity to reimagine digital innovation not as technocratic progress but as a cultural act, preserving soul while building smarter infrastructure.

Digital culture as a foundation for smart cities

Digital culture goes beyond digitised content or creative industries. It is about the way people act, behave, engage, and form beliefs and values collectively with technologies in digital environments. It is also about how culture and heritage are preserved and integrated into the digital ecosystem. Yet within current smart city strategies, cultural digitisation has received relatively little attention.

The success of Vietnam's smart city agenda hinges not solely on top-down technological deployment, but on bottom-up cultural adaptation and citizen-driven innovation. Smart cities must be designed for data efficiency as well as the human experience, ensuring technology enhances – not erases – local identities, creative agency, and cultural meaning. Otherwise, people may feel disconnected from

the very systems designed to serve them, like living in a place that's intelligent, but indifferent.

We already have cultural assets to build from. Three Vietnamese cities are recognised in the UNESCO Creative Cities Network: Hanoi for design, Hoi An for crafts and folk art, and Da Lat for music. The local creative digital art scene is burgeoning, with interdisciplinary collaborations forming.

Vietnamese people are also known for their everyday ingenuity. Take the motorcycle culture that defines its urban life: what looks chaotic to outsiders is, in fact, a deeply adaptive and creative system of self-organisation. It reflects how citizens navigate, negotiate, and repurpose infrastructure to suit their lived realities. This phenomenon exemplifies the creative resilience in Vietnam.

"The success of Vietnam's smart city agenda hinges not solely on top-down technological deployment, but on bottom-up cultural adaptation and citizen-driven innovation."

Associate Professor Kok Yoong Lim
Deputy Dean, Research & Innovation
School of Communication & Design

Investing in creative people and creative technology

Most smart city discourse today remains narrowly focused on "technologising" essential infrastructure and services, giving rise to tech-infused buzzwords such as FinTech, GovTech, EduTech, and HealthTech. Crucially absent in many national and regional strategies is an articulation of ArtTech or CultureTech – domains that nourish identity, culture, creativity, and belonging.

A truly inclusive smart society should therefore move beyond infrastructure toward "infrastructures of meaning". In a society full of algorithms, it's the storytellers, artists and designers who will help people feel connected. What will make Vietnam stand out is not just its digital transformation, but its commitment to keeping the human element at the centre. After all, a truly smart city is a people-centred city.

In this regard, educational institutions like RMIT play an instrumental role, helping Vietnam's young and tech-savvy generation emerge not just as passive digital citizens, but culturally conscious co-creators of the country's digital future.

What's perhaps most exciting about Vietnam's potential is its capacity to dream boldly while staying rooted. It is a place where culture meets microchip, where youthful energy reanimates age-old wisdom. The smart society we build by 2050 will have digital artists who are cultural translators, storytellers who are fluent in code, tech innovators who are poets, curators who dream in algorithm, and ethnographers who can build digital heritage.

Young creatives should embrace their important role in this future. By building interdisciplinary capabilities and cultural sensibilities right now, they can make meaningful contribution to the future with their storytelling, design, and imagination.

Story: Associate Professor Kok Yoong Lim

"A truly inclusive smart society should therefore move beyond infrastructure toward 'infrastructures of meaning'."

Photo: RMIT

Section 4 Culture and identity

MSEs and their growing role in Vietnam's creative economy

Vietnam's creative economy is emerging as a vital pillar for sustainable and inclusive development. At the heart of this growing movement are micro and small enterprises (MSEs), which connect local heritage with innovation, creativity, and community values.

Photo: Vietnam Design Research Studio

Amid global shifts and growing calls for sustainability and cultural preservation, Associate Professor Donna Cleveland, Dean, and Ms Lam Hong Lan, PhD candidate and Associate Lecturer, both from RMIT's School of Communication & Design, reflect on the evolving role of micro and small enterprises (MSEs) in Vietnam's creative economy.

Drawing on academic insights and real-world examples, they examine where Vietnam's creative economy stands today, what the next 25 years may hold, and what actions are needed to unlock its full potential.

Vietnam's creative economy: Where we are now

The creative economy is a growing concept that blends culture, creativity, and technology to drive economic and social progress. It encompasses sectors such as fashion, film, design, crafts, and gaming - offering not just commercial potential but also contributions to cultural identity, inclusivity, and sustainability.

In Vietnam, micro and small enterprises (MSEs) - those with fewer than 50 employees - form the backbone of the creative sector. These businesses are agile, deeply rooted in community, and often driven by cultural heritage. Many have successfully leveraged digital platforms and social media to create niche markets for sustainable and culturally resonant products.

Notably, three Vietnamese cities - Hanoi (design), Hoi An (crafts), and Da Lat (music) - have joined UNESCO's Creative Cities Network, while Vietnam ranks among the top three developing countries for creative product exports, reaching over USD14 million in 2020. However, challenges persist. Fashion MSEs are struggling with limited access to finance, scalability issues, and unclear regulatory frameworks that fail to accommodate the unique structures of informal labour and community-based production.

The next 25 years: Innovation, sustainability, and cultural entrepreneurship

Looking ahead, Vietnam's creative economy will increasingly be shaped by three forces: digital innovation, sustainable practices, and cultural entrepreneurship. Fashion-focused MSEs are poised to lead this shift by adopting circular business models, embedding heritage into contemporary design, and strengthening local partnerships.

Technological advancements will play a crucial role. AI-assisted design, virtual sampling, and 3D prototyping will enable small brands to reduce waste, improve production speed, and remain competitive globally. For example, KHAAR uses AI to reconfigure fabric waste into new designs, while Moi Dien merges technology with traditional craftsmanship passed down by retired seamstresses, blending innovation with intergenerational knowledge.

Collaborative design and ethical sourcing will become even more important. Brands like Kilomet109 and Linht Handicraft are demonstrating how respectful, long-term partnerships with artisan communities not only produce unique products but also support innovation grounded in trust.

At the same time, younger generations, especially Gen Z, are driving demand for sustainable and story-rich fashion. They support brands like Dong Dong, which recycles industrial waste into accessories, and seek out labels that reflect personal values and cultural roots. These consumers expect transparency, ethical sourcing, and meaningful narratives behind the products they buy.

As MSEs embrace zero-waste design, local production, and digital platforms, they have the potential to influence both domestic markets and international perceptions. With the right support, Vietnam could emerge as a global leader in culturally grounded, environmentally responsible fashion and offer a model of how creativity and sustainability can co-exist.

Unlocking the full potential through policy, education, and institutions

To fully realise the promise of MSEs in Vietnam's creative economy, a national long-term strategy is essential. One immediate priority is the development of clearer regulatory frameworks, particularly around tax and labour. Many MSEs rely on informal networks, including ethnic artisans and retired seamstresses, who are often excluded from traditional financial systems. Tailored tax incentives and simplified policies could help formalise their contributions and scale impact, while remaining true to their social and cultural values.

Public infrastructure also needs strengthening. Government-backed initiatives such as national fashion showcases or curated creative marketplaces could enhance the visibility and commercial success of small brands. Vietnam could learn from countries like South Korea and China, where public investment in creative industries has fuelled national pride and global recognition.

Education is another crucial pillar. Integrating sustainability, design thinking, and entrepreneurship into secondary and tertiary curricula would prepare students to thrive in a value-driven creative economy. Public awareness campaigns can also shift consumer perceptions and foster appreciation for co-designed, recycled, and ethically made products.

RMIT Vietnam is already contributing to this transition. The School of Communication & Design embeds sustainability and cultural relevance into its programs, with a clear vision to become a regional hub for creativity and innovation. This ambition is reflected in the School's strong track record of student achievement, with students consistently earning national and international recognition, including being the most awarded university at Vietnam Young Lions for three years running. These successes are backed by strong industry partnerships and cutting-edge research in co-design, circular fashion, and material innovation. By connecting education with industry and community, RMIT is helping shape a generation of creative leaders who are not only skilled, but also socially and environmentally responsible.

Looking ahead, what gives the academics hope is the alignment of three key forces: growing government recognition of the creative industries, local communities embracing more ethical and regenerative practices, and the emergence of a new generation of designers and makers who are globally aware, digitally fluent, and grounded in Vietnamese culture.

Photo: RMIT

> **"Looking ahead, Vietnam's creative economy will increasingly be shaped by three forces: digital innovation, sustainable practices, and cultural entrepreneurship."**

Both believe the next 25 years will be defined not only by what we produce, but by how we produce it: with care, with conscience, and with a deep respect for the stories, people, and places that shape our work. This is Vietnam's chance to lead by example and show the world how creativity, sustainability, and cultural identity can build a future that is both meaningful and lasting.

Story: Quan Dinh H.

Photo:
Vietnam Design Research Studio

Photo: RMIT

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This has been a collaborative journey, and we are proud to have created something meaningful together.

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