



Australia Awards

# Strategies for promoting leadership pathways for female Australia Awards alumni in Vietnam.

Preparatory design study for Human Resource  
Development Program in Vietnam (2016-20).



## ACRONYMS

AAS	Australia Awards Scholarships
AAV	Australia Awards Office in Vietnam
ADS	Australian Development Scholarships
AEI	Australian Education International
ALAF	Australia Leadership Awards Fellowships
ALAS	Australian Leadership Awards Scholarships
CEDA	Committee for Economic Development of Australia
CEMA	Central Committee for Ethnic Minority Affairs
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Australia)
HCMC	Ho Chi Minh City
HRD	Human Resource Development
IELTS	International English Language Testing System
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MOET	Ministry of Education and Training (Vietnam)
MOHA	Ministry of Home Affairs (Vietnam)
MOLISA	Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (Vietnam)
MPI	Ministry of Planning and Investment
NGO	Non-Government Organisation

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study results from the support of many dedicated individuals. Thanks is foremost owed to the DFAT Human Resource Development (HRD) Team who initiated the idea of a preparatory study on women's career achievement in order to ingrain a focus on women in the weave of the forthcoming program. Fond thanks go to Ms Simone Corrigan, Ms Nguyen Thu Hang, Mr Nguyen Van Thuan, Ms Ton Nu Hue Chi, and Ms Le Minh Nga. Debt is also owed to the skilled and friendly staff of the Australia Awards Program in Vietnam (AAV). Mr Graham Alliband, the AAV Team Leader, has generously offered helpful suggestions at every stage of the study. Mr Vu Tiep, the AAV database manager, is as talented as he is patient and every AAV alumni's data collection phase would be all the better for his input. Warm thanks also go to Ms Cara Ellikson, the AA Gender and Social Inclusion Adviser whose analyses and support I have drawn on deeply here. The annexes list the considerable number of experts who offered their time and insights, in part motivated by the potential for the DFAT program to make a difference for women. And lastly, close on 700 AA alumni gave of their time to participate in study activities, through the survey and interviews. It is hoped that that this study does justice to the candour and suggestions they offered.

Report author: Mia Urbano, DFAT Regional Social Development Specialist, South East Asia Hub

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*“The best way to promote a woman, is to promote a woman.”<sup>1</sup>*

In 2013-14, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) formulated a new Australia-Vietnam Human Resource Development (HRD) Strategy to guide the next phase of investment in HRD in Vietnam. With the design phase commencing in 2015, DFAT commissioned a select number of preparatory studies to provide in-depth analysis of priority issues and challenges. One such issue female alumni's lower access to professional development and promotion opportunities. Tracer Study data for 2014 revealed the following gender gaps:

- Among recently returned alumni (2010-2012), men were **almost 50% more likely than women to be in a management position** and it was consistently higher in all of the 5 cohorts (i.e. generations);
- Men were **more likely to be promoted at work** (51.7% of men, 40.9% of women);
- A greater percentage of **male alumni returned to a higher position** than women (28.6% of men as compared with 20.4% of women);
- For academics, men were more likely than women to report that their **supervisors had supported them to a great extent**; and
- Men were **more likely to publish an article** in a journal.

DFAT commissioned this study to confirm and better understand the reasons for the gender differential in access to promotion, and to propose recommendations for enhancing the promotion of mid-career Australia Awards alumni to senior positions.

The study was conducted over the period October – December 2014, in order to inform the design process in the first quarter of 2015. The study consisted of 39 semi-structured interviews, and a short survey of all alumni (with responses returned from 506 women and 176 men). It focuses on the public sector.

At the outset of the study, two issues demanded greater definition:

- 1) Firstly, the topic of career and leadership aspirations for women provoked discussion of its own. While a number of female alumni expressed their support for this study, many women questioned its premise. In interviews, women expressed alternative aspirations to leadership including ‘career fulfilment’, ‘work-life balance’, and ‘deepening their technical expertise’. It was decided to frame the study as supporting female alumni interested in leadership pathways.
- 2) Secondly, despite the study focus on the public sector, many respondents underlined that women's career mobility differs between the public and private sector generally, and even according to the organisational type. There was a consensus that female alumni working for I/NGOs and US/European multi-national corporations did not experience constraints in their career progression. It was felt that women faced the greatest challenges to obtaining promotion within central government agencies. The implication of this finding was that women's prospect of career promotion is likely to be influenced by the culture of the sector or organisation type, and that the HRD program needs to adapt its goals accordingly.

The study identified that the barriers and enablers affecting women's operate at three distinct levels:

1. Personal and household factors
2. Workplace factors
3. National policies and gender expectations

Numerous barriers and enablers were identified at each level. The main findings are summarised as follows.

Level	Findings
Personal and household factors	Enablers included: supportive spouses, parents and in-laws; and a woman's self-confidence and self-efficacy. Barriers included: women's domestic lives and caring responsibilities; work-life balance pressures, and husbands not being involved in childcare; and women's

<sup>1</sup> Quote from female alumnus in an interview for this study, November 2014.

	acceptance of need to 'sacrifice' career ambition for family.
Workplace factors	Enablers included: managers that encouraged women's career promotion; and the introduction of merit-based performance assessment frameworks.  Barriers included: workplace dynamics such as male hierarchies and cliques; male patronage structures; women's time constraints and limited mobility; internal recruitment practices; and women's exclusion from informal socialising with bosses.
National policies and gender expectations	Enablers included: Vietnam's support for women's educational achievement; strong gender equality framework; and national policies on gender equality targets and quotas.  Barriers included: cultural conceptions by both men and women of leadership as a male competency; discriminatory policies such as gender-disparities in the age limits for public sector employees to be eligible for overseas training or for promotion, and early retirement age for women; gender wage gap and lack of parental leave.

Potential options for the new HRD program to support women interested in leadership pathways and to promote gender equality generally are summarised in the table below. Alumni also offered the following advice in the context of interviews:

- Good HRD practices from western countries are hard to apply. The best way to help change culture is for people to be exposed to organisational cultures and gender equality within Australia.
- The challenge with leadership training is that many women return to patriarchal institutions. However, women may be able to apply those leadership skills in other ways to Vietnam's development. For example, they could form associations, serve as mentors, or patrons to NGOs.
- Consider two stage leadership training for women: one course with a mixture of men and women so that they can share their ideas and aptitudes in a professional, non-competitive environment; and offer a dedicated component for women so that domestic responsibilities and gender issues can be discussed.
- The main barriers to women's promotion are political and cultural, and so consider what is realistic for an outsider.

HRD Component	Outline of option
Component 1: Scholarships Program <i>Mainstreaming activities</i>	Host pre-departure and reintegration seminars with scholars and their spouses/partners.  Reconsideration of the DFAT requirement of a break between completion of Masters and application for PhD (break should be double the time spent in Australia).  Expand the small grants scheme to include groups of alumni to host activities on women's leadership in their workplaces.  Reconsideration of sandwich PhD option to enable women with young children to consider applying.
Component 1: Scholarships Program <i>Dedicated components</i>	Establish a prestigious competitive, certificated 'Leadership Stream' within annual scholarships round.
Component 2: Skills utilisation and enabling environment <i>Mainstreaming activities</i>	Organise a calendar of skills building events, open to all alumni but responsive to issues women have raised in this study, e.g. seminar on communicating achievements comfortably, career development planning support, short course on public speaking  Devise a special program offering for the select number of targeted public sector

	organisations (supported by dialogue to encourage uptake), offering networking event for leaders of targeted organisations, and HRD program's facility to provide HRD and career planning, review of policies and procedures
Component 2: Skills utilisation and enabling environment	Consider package of support to Women in Politics and Public Administration at the HCM National Academy of Politics and Public Administration.
Dedicated components	Host 'Inspirational Women Series' for outbound and returned female alumni, including panel with successful women from the public and private sector, networking events between junior and senior women, launch booklet and video on stories of successful female, and host networking event with successful Australian women in equivalent institutions (in coordination with Austrade and AEI)
	Publically recognise the efforts of organisations taking measures for women publically through an Australia Day award
	Conduct Cluster Study on impact of ADS experience on gender equality in the home and adjustment experiences, including women's own self-confidence, and changes in division of labour or status with husband.
	Engage the Ambassador and Foreign Minister / Ambassador for Women and Girls in diplomatic dialogue with MOHA to equalise the retirement and training eligibility age for women.

## INTRODUCTION

This preparatory study was commissioned to inform the new Human Resource Development (HRD) program design for Vietnam (2016-2020). The study was prompted by Tracer Study report findings from 2011 and 2014 indicating a persistent gap between men and women's opportunity to obtain a promotion to senior roles upon their return to Vietnam.

Women and men returning from study in Australia both encounter obstacles and updrafts in climbing the career ladder in Vietnam. However, a gender gap exists, and the reasons unique to female alumni's lower rate of success in obtaining promotion to senior roles needs to be better understood. The Vietnam program is one of the few Australia Awards programs with a balance of awards currently favouring women. This therefore adds impetus to addressing constraints for professional development and promotion opportunities for female alumni upon return to workplaces in Vietnam.

As a precursor study for the new design, the study is in a position to raise issues and questions for the design team's consideration. It also offers tentative recommendations and strategies for supporting women's promotion. It is likely that some of these initiatives will benefit men, and other non-Australia Awards alumni as well.

As expected for a study focused on gender-related barriers and enablers, some of the more significant factors affecting women's career prospects play out within the confines of households and the upper reaches of Vietnam's political and public administration. Both domains are beyond the immediate reach of DFAT's HRD investment. It is intended that highlighting these factors will mean that the resulting HRD design is realistic and focused in how DFAT can intervene to support women's promotion. More importantly, it is hoped that by bringing these factors to light, the design team is urged and better equipped to be creative in its responses.

Before launching into exploration of the barriers and proposed strategies for supporting women, the focus of this study should not overshadow the numerous examples of successful female alumni who have attained senior professional roles and are influential figures in the public and private sectors. As of 2014, 17 alumni were identified as having a significant role in promoting gender equality. In Hanoi and HCM City alone, there are over 100 women designated in the Australia Awards (AA) alumni database as 'successful'. This includes directors, chairs, general and brand managers, and HR directors of Vietnamese and multinational companies; deans, department heads and research institute directors within academic institutes; director-general and vice-director roles in the central ministries of health, justice and foreign affairs; as well as being organisation founders, and editors-in-chief. A number of female alumni have even completed doctoral level dissertations on the very topic of women's access to political and public sector leadership in Vietnam.<sup>2</sup> All of these women are both role models and a resource for change.

### Gender equality within the Australia Awards Vietnam Program

#### *Gender equality in access to scholarships*

Equal access to scholarships for men and women is an explicit objective of the current AAV program (2009-15). The program commitment is that:

Women and men have equal opportunity of obtaining Masters and PhD scholarships in order to develop and utilise new skills and contribute to development in the priority development areas and to gender equality in Vietnam.

Achievement of this objective has been supported by the appointment of a Gender and Social Inclusion Adviser, and by the formulation of: 1) a *Gender, Disability and Social Inclusion Strategy and Plan* (2014-15); and 2) an *Equity of Access Fund* (2013) to promote scholarship access to women and men experiencing disadvantage on account of disability, ethnicity and rural residence.

---

<sup>2</sup> a) Nguyen Thi Lan Huong. (2013). Barriers to and facilitators of female Deans' career advancement in higher education: an exploratory study in Vietnam. *Higher Education*, 66(1), 123-138; b) Ngoc Lan Thi Dang. (2012). *Vietnamese Women in Academic Leadership: Experiences of Mid-Level Women Leaders in Universities and Colleges in the Mekong Delta*. [Ms Ngoc completed a Master degree at the University of Sydney]; and c) Le Thi Thuc. (2009). *Femininity and Masculinity: The Dilemmas of Women in Political Leadership in Vietnam*. Australian National University;

The AAV program has been remarkably successful in achieving gender equality. As compared with the early intakes of the AAV program, when the balance of awards favoured men, women have consistently outnumbered men in scholarship awards annually since 2003.<sup>3</sup> In 2014, women in fact outnumbered men in both applications and awards, across all scholarship categories. (See Table 1 below). The ratio of *applications* has hovered at 60:40 favouring women for the past three years; however the balance of *awards* has also steadily increased for women over the same period - from 55% (2012), to 56% (2013) and finally to 62.2% (2014).

There was a concern in the 2013 round about the high elimination rate of women between shortlisting and selection among PhD and local government applicants, and ethnicity minority women (despite meeting the IELTS requirement). However this pattern did not recur in the 2014 round.

Categories	Female Applicants %	Male Applicants %	Female Awards %	Male Awards %
<b>BY AAV PROFILES:</b>				
Profile 1: Local government officials, staff from local NGOs and provincial enterprises	60.7%	39.3%	63.1%	36.9%
Profile 2: Central agency officials	65.9%	34.1%	68%	32%
Profile 3: Tertiary lecturers and researchers	58.3%	41.7%	57.1%	42.9%
<b>BY LEVEL:</b>				
PhD	53.8%	46.2%	51.3%	48.6%
Master	63.1%	36.9%	64.9%	35.1%
<b>BY EQUITY OF ACCESS FUND:</b>				
With disability	57.1%	42.9%	71.4%	28.6%
Rural disadvantaged	59.8%	40.2%	67.9%	32.1%
Ethnic minority origin	67.3%	32.7%	64.3%	35.7%
<b>BY TOTAL:</b>	<b>60.4%</b>	<b>39.6%</b>	<b>62.2%</b>	<b>37.8%</b>

Table 1: Breakdown of 2014 round of applications and awards, by category and sex.<sup>4</sup>

These trends are positive in terms of AAV's promotion of scholarships to women and of women's performance in the interview process. A number of alumni interviewed for this study praised AAV's active efforts in encouraging women to apply. However, there are other possible reasons for the prominence of women in the program.

AAV has recently explored men's interests in further study and their employment patterns. In 2012, AAV undertook an *Impact Study of the Scholarship Program on Central Government Agencies* that featured case studies on the Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI) and of the State Bank of Vietnam (SBV). The study noted that for previous 4 years, women accounted for 73% of MPI's nominations and 82% of SBV's. The sex ratio of applications from these two central government agencies was consistent with AAV's experience that they had 'struggled to attract sufficient good male candidates' from the public sector in recent years.<sup>5</sup> This is partly attributable to employment patterns, whereby young male graduates are increasingly opting for private sector employment with higher incomes. Similarly, the public sector offers job security for women.

Consultations by the AAV Gender and Social Inclusion Adviser also found that Vietnamese men are less inclined to undertake overseas study because of a perception that they will lose networks and the workplace relationships that are critical for promotion. Interestingly, data from the 2011 and 2014 Tracer Studies note an overall decline in the percentage of both men and women who were promoted upon return.

<sup>3</sup> AAV 3<sup>rd</sup> Monitoring and Evaluation Report, October 2012: 2

<sup>4</sup> Data drawn from AAV 2014 Annual Report (draft) and verified with AAV database.

<sup>5</sup> AAV 3<sup>rd</sup> Monitoring and Evaluation Report, October 2012: 21

### *Gender equality outcomes from the scholarships*

The AAV program has examined two kinds of gender equality outcomes arising from its scholarships program:

1. The reintegration experiences of alumni, including their career trajectories, employment achievements, and the opportunity to influence their workplaces.
2. Whether and how alumni contributed to gender equality upon their return to Vietnam.

#### *1. Reintegration and achievements:*

According to the 2014 Tracer Study that surveyed alumni who had returned between 1998-2012, women and men fared equally in many respects. They were just as likely to change to a better job, present an international conference paper, receive a grant or prize, return to Australia, and participate in an organisational linkage between Vietnam and Australia.<sup>6</sup> Male returnees were marginally more likely to work for a private Vietnamese company (10.8% versus 8.7%) or a joint venture company, and women were more prevalent within foreign-owned companies.

However, the following gender gaps were noted:

- Among recently returned alumni (2010-2012), men were **almost 50% more likely than women to be in a management position** and it was consistently higher in all of the 5 cohorts;
- Men were **more likely to be promoted at work** (51.7% of men, 40.9% of women);
- A greater percentage of **male alumni returned to a higher position** than women (28.6% of men as compared with 20.4% of women);
- For academics, men were more likely than women to report that their **supervisors had supported them to a great extent**; and
- Men were **more likely to publish an article** in a journal.

Apart from the encouraging data that the percentage of men and women in management positions was almost equal among alumni who had returned between 2007-9, women are consistently less likely to report promotion and management achievements. The 10-percentage point difference between men and women being promoted at work is consistent with the gender gap noted in the 2011 Tracer Study where 74% of men reported being promoted among return, as compared with 62% of women.<sup>7</sup>

The 2014 Tracer Study surveyed alumni about changes in job salary and benefits upon return, as well as in job responsibilities, however the report did not present the sex-disaggregated picture. Wage value or remuneration scales were not reported – a potential point of difference between men and women. Information is collected but not yet reported on awardees with children, a factor that is likely to have a bearing on scholarship uptake and outcomes upon return, by sex.

In terms of access to decision-making and influencing workplace culture, **significantly more men than women reported making improvements to their management systems** (44.9% versus 29.1%) and **policies** (41.5% versus 25.7%), and to enhance linkages with other organisations (36% versus 25.7%).<sup>8</sup> This data tallies with men more likely to be in management positions.

The AAV 3<sup>rd</sup> Monitoring and Evaluation Report (2012) had also explored alumni access to senior positions in their workplaces. The report defined 'senior' as director level and above in the public sector, and general managers/CEOs in the private sector.<sup>9</sup> It found that 17% of female alumni were in leadership positions, as compared with 31% of men. Men are more likely to be in senior roles across all three organisational profiles, as highlighted in Table 2 below.

<sup>6</sup> Bracegirdle, P. (6 October 2014). 2014 Tracer Study of Australia Awards Alumni in Vietnam – Findings on Gender Equality: 3.

<sup>7</sup> Noted in the AAV Alumni Tracer Study, October 2014: 74

<sup>8</sup> AAV Alumni Tracer Study, October 2014: 37

<sup>9</sup> AAV 3rd Monitoring and Evaluation Report, October 2012: 8

Type	% of alumni in senior positions	Men No.	Men %	Women No.	Women %	Total No.
<b>1. Government officers</b>	45%	112	69%	51	31%	163
Vice Ministers		3	100%	0	0%	3
Director Generals		4	80%	1	20%	5
<b>2. Educational Institutions</b>	30%	106	57%	81	43%	187
Rector		7	100%	0	0%	7
Vice Rectors		5	63%	3	38%	8
<b>3. Research Institutions</b>	50%	46	64%	26	36%	72
Institute Directors		2	100%	0	0%	2
<b>4. Vietnamese owned private business</b>	32%	55	65%	29	35%	84
CEO, Board Member or General Managers		24	83%	5	17%	29
<b>5. Foreign owned business</b>	13%	9	69%	4	31%	13

Table 2: Breakdown of alumni in senior positions, by category and sex.<sup>10</sup>

Data therefore suggests that **female alumni are either less interested, supported, and/or less successful in seeking promotion** to management and leadership positions than men, and have had less influence on decision-making and management systems.

## 2. Alumni contribution to gender equality:

In 2012, AAV also undertook a *Cluster Study on Australian Development Scholarships Alumni Contribution to Gender Equality in Vietnam*. The study examined the type and extent of alumni contributions to gender equality in Vietnam, and it identified thirteen alumni (F:12; M:1) that met its criteria. The study includes biographies on 11 alumni. Their major workplace achievements included: the conduct of gender equality training, of gender mainstreaming within education and human resource management, support for female colleagues to attend leadership courses, and advocacy to university management boards about equal opportunity appointments and quotas.

Of relevance to the present study, three of these alumni were in senior positions and the cluster study led to the creation of an AAV Alumni Gender Expert Group which was sampled for this study. The list now includes 17 alumni. The 2014 Tracer Study found that a marginally higher percentage of women than men promoted gender equality in their organisation (24.6% of women versus 19.7% of men)<sup>11</sup> - low overall, but higher than the overall rate in 2011 (15.7%).<sup>12</sup> However, as acknowledged in the 2012 Cluster Study, the imprint of alumni on gender equality outcomes in Vietnam is modest.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Data drawn from AAV 3<sup>rd</sup> Monitoring and Evaluation Report, October 2012

<sup>11</sup> See AAV Alumni Tracer Study, October 2014: 44

<sup>12</sup> See AAV Alumni Tracer Study, October 2014: 75

<sup>13</sup> AAV 3<sup>rd</sup> Monitoring and Evaluation Report, October 2012: Annex B, p10

## STUDY DESIGN

### *Background and Objectives:*

In light of the findings from AAV Tracer Studies, DFAT commissioned this study to understand the factors that explain female alumni's lower access to promotion and to senior roles, and to suggest strategies for supporting women interested in leadership pathways.

DFAT's new HRD Strategy (2014) is committed to enhancing factors and addressing barriers faced by female alumni. The Strategy cited the need for targeted leadership and management training for women, and for the provision of support for changes to the 'enabling environment' so that workplaces were conducive places for women's promotion.

This study has two objectives:

- a. To identify and rank the key enablers of and barriers to professional leadership faced by female alumni in their workplaces; and
- b. To identify feasible strategies that the HRD Program can employ to enhance the enabling environment for women who access support under the next phase of the program.

The study is best described as a rapid assessment, with primary data collection being taken over a two-week period in November 2014. The study focused on public sector organisations, specifically targeting central government agencies and tertiary institutions in Hanoi and HCM City. This was to avoid overlap with the concurrent DFAT-commissioned HRD study on private sector organisations.

### *Approach:*

Based on a preliminary literature review, factors affecting women's career promotion are numerous and multi-level. It became apparent that the most significant factors would likely relate to social and cultural norms, patronage structures and households dynamics – arguably beyond the reach of a donor-funded scholarships program.

The following framework (Figure 1) was therefore developed to make sense of the different levels affecting female alumni's promotion. This framework was subsequently used to design study tools and to organise the findings in this report.



Figure 1: Framework developed for study design and analysis

**Methods:** The following methods were employed for the conduct of this study:

#### *Phase 1:*

- Review of international and national literature relevant to understanding enablers and barriers faced by women in career development, particularly in the public service and tertiary education sector (with specific reference to Vietnam, Asia or Middle Income Countries) and effective policies and interventions for addressing these. (See the reference list in the annexes of this report.)

- Review of sex-disaggregated data extracted from the Tracer Surveys for 2011 and 2014 to identify common themes on career level achieved by women as compared with men, and identify candidates for interview who have reached senior positions.
- Review of AAV database to identify clusters of female alumni in public sector organisations, and to identify candidates for key informant interviews on account of their seniority or their HR work experience in Vietnam.
- On the basis of the literature review, development of: 1) a questionnaire to send separately to all female and male AAV alumni (c. 4000) using the Survey Monkey website; and 2) a semi-structured question guide, tailored to interviewee type.
- Conduct of key informant interviews (i.e. people with content matter expertise, or prominent female alumni) (n=13) to elucidate key enablers and barriers, success factors, and probe for recommended strategies.

#### Phase 2:

- Distribution of Survey Monkey Questionnaire to all AAV alumni, and follow-up promotion. Male and female alumni were given equivalent surveys, with the aim of comparing men and women's perception of personal, household, workplace and national level factors; as well as using the opportunity to raise awareness of factors affecting women's promotion among men and women.

#### Phase 3:

- Conduct of semi-structured interviews (n=26) with alumni on their perceptions and experience of enablers and success factors, barriers, and recommended strategies for the HRD investment. This primarily focused on female alumni in Hanoi and HCMC, but also included a small number of male alumni and alumni working in HR management roles in Vietnam.
- Content analysis of interview transcripts and data analysis of quantitative and qualitative results from the female and male alumni questionnaires.

### Study participants:

Phases	Method	Respondents
Phase 1	Key informant interviews	12 women, 1 man
Phase 2	Survey Monkey Questionnaire	506 female alumni
		176 male alumni
Phase 3	Semi-structured interviews: individual	16 women
		2 men
	Semi-structured interviews: group	1 x Hanoi (3 women) 2 x HCMC (5 women, 2 men)
TOTALS	Totals interviewed (KII + SSI)	34 women, 5 men
	Totals surveyed	506 women, 176 men

### Limitations and modifications:

1. *Selected organisations:* The study had shortlisted two different government departments and two different university workplaces each in Hanoi and HCM City. It was intended that that this targeted approach would enable access and introductions (i.e. using 'snowballing' technique) to supervisors, HR managers, and non-Australia Award peers within the target institutions. However, upon contacting nodal alumni at these organisations, the tight timeframe of the study and the varying availability of alumni (e.g. some were overseas, had retired or changed institutions) meant that the targeted approach was not possible.
2. *Gender expert alumni:* A validation workshop and photography-based methods were planned as part of the methodology for the study, with the intent to involve the Alumni Gender Expert Group in both. The ultimately low turnout at the Alumni Gender Expert Group consultation (7 of a possible 17 RSVPs, but only 2 attendees), meant that these participatory methods were not pursued.

3. *Concurrent studies and consultation burden:* DFAT also commissioned a ‘Special Study of the Conditions and Practices in Organisations affecting the Application of Alumni’s Skills and Knowledge in the Workplace in Vietnam’, as well as a ‘Feasibility Study of engaging the private sector in improving the Vietnam TVET sector’s responsiveness to industry demands’. While discussions were held to ensure that the Special Study was complementary with the current one, it was decided to focus on different target organisations to avoid stakeholder burden. However, some key alumni or issues may have been missed.

## STUDY FINDINGS

### 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

#### *Context of women in leadership in Vietnam:*

Understanding of the general patterns and attitudes to women’s leadership in Vietnam is crucial for framing support to female alumni interested in leadership pathways.

Vietnam is justly commended for its progress on gender equality, particularly in closing the gender gap in primary and secondary education, and in substantial reductions in maternal mortality. Vietnam also ranks 13<sup>th</sup> internationally for the high rates of labour force participation by women, as compared with men (73.5% versus 82.5%) (Vietnam Labour Force Survey, 2013; World Bank, 2011; UNDP, 2012).

However, the patterns of women in political and professional leadership are less consistent.

Representation of women in the National Assembly is high by regional standards, but it is still fractional to men’s. Women comprise 24.4% of the seats in the 2011-2016 National Assembly term. This has been a decline from 25.76% in 2007-11, and from a peak of 27.3% at the start of the decade in 2002-2007. It also falls short of the target set by the National Strategy on Gender Equality of a minimum 30% representation by women for the 2011-2015 term (UNDP, 2014). Currently, only 2 of 22 Ministers are women (9%) and only 10 of 128 Vice-Ministers are women (UNDP, 2012).

At the sub-national level, women represent 26% of elected positions. However, women are seldom Chair of the People’s Committee, with rates as low as 1.56% at the provincial level and 4.09% at the commune level. Studies on men and women’s attitudes toward women leaders have found that respondents of either sex would prefer to elect men as politicians. In the administrative arm of the government, there are few women in senior decision making positions despite the large number of women civil servants. Departmental leadership is almost entirely male, with women accounting for only 7% of all department directors and 12% of vice-directors (UNDP, 2012). Women are meant to account for a minimum of 30% of enrolments in political theory and public administration courses – which are key for promotion. However, enrolment rates are between 10-20% at the central level (UNDP, undated).

The notable exception is the case of women in the private sector. Vietnam ranks as one of the top 10 countries globally with the highest percentage of women in senior management positions. It also rates 4th globally on the list of countries with the highest percentage of women on company boards. Aside from this positive rating, no analysis was found comparing the leadership of women in company roles, as compared with the public sector.<sup>14</sup>

#### *Barriers and enablers for women’s career progression:*

A limited number of studies have explored the enablers and barriers facing professional women in their progression to leadership positions in the public sector in Vietnam. Studies include those on public administration (Tran & Fezzardi, 2010; USAID, 2010; EOWP-IFGS, 2009; Kabeer et al), as well as recent studies on women in educational leadership and management (Kelly, 2011; Funnell & Dao, 2012) and on women in science (IFS, 2009). Barriers collectively identified in these sources include: those relating to women’s self-

---

<sup>14</sup> Grant Thornton. (2013). Women in senior management: setting the stage for growth: Grant Thornton International Business Report 2013

belief and esteem; cultural conceptions by both men and women of leadership as a male competency; household factors such as women's 'care responsibilities' for children, the ill and the elderly; workplace dynamics such as harassment, 'boys clubs' and male patronage structures; and discriminatory policies such as gender-disparities in the age limits for public sector employees to be eligible for overseas training or for promotion. Enabling factors were fewer in number but included: supportive spouses, parents and in-laws; membership of the Communist Party of Vietnam; managers that encouraged women's career promotion; the introduction of merit-based performance assessment frameworks; the profiling of successful professional women; and engaging male colleagues (supervisors and peers) in joint leadership training.

One (understandably) small-scale study of women university rectors of Vietnam (Funnell & Dao, 2013) also highlighted that leadership is both a 'journey' and a 'destination'. Of the four women rectors interviewed, each woman was in the right place at the right time (e.g. when economic changes were taking place under *Doi Moi*) with the requisite 'capitals' – social, cultural, family and political – in order to be chosen for promotion in the first place. To remain in the role required a balancing of 'traditional male traits of being decisive with traditional female traits of being collaborative and nurturing'.<sup>15</sup>

The lower retirement age for women in the public sector (55 years as compared to 60 years for men) is frequently cited as a critical barrier for women's promotion in Vietnam. Despite the recent policy amendment that women working at Vice Director and Director level in government may retire at 60 years, very few women benefit from this reform. Given the career breaks for child rearing and the unequal division of domestic work, the early retirement age affects many things: the willingness of an organisation to invest in a woman's professional development; a lower cut-off age for administrative and political training, for nomination for Master and PhD study (35 years for women, 40 for men)<sup>16</sup>, for promotion opportunities, and for inclusion in the 5-year projected staffing plan. This is aside from the lower income earning duration for women, and smaller retirement pensions.

#### **Australian alumni findings on women's leadership:**

Given that at least 3 Australia Awards alumni have undertaken doctoral level research on aspects of women in leadership in Vietnam, an abstract of their findings on the topic is highlighted here.

**Dr Le Thi Thuc. Femininity and Masculinity: The Dilemmas of Women in Political Leadership in Vietnam (2009):** The study demonstrates that senior women civil servants and in politics face disadvantages in both their official positions and in actually wielding power in decision making. The study found cultural factors to be the most influential in restricting women's access to political opportunities. Surprisingly, females in the political elite expressed similar attitudes to those of their male counterparts regarding men's and women's political participation, as well as in how they assess women's political capability. These attitudes could significantly block progress in gender equality of Vietnam, both in the process of women's selection and self-nomination for office and even in the willingness of women to apply for advancement.

**Dr Nguyen Thi Lan Huong. Barriers to and facilitators of female Deans' career advancement in higher education: an exploratory study in Vietnam (2013):** This study found that the main barriers are strong family obligations, negative gender stereotypes regarding females as leaders, and female academics' unwillingness to take management positions. The major facilitators of female Deans' career advancement are self-effort, strong family support, and, what is perceived to be, a favourable or 'lucky' selection context.

**Dr Ngoc Lan Thi Dang. Vietnamese Women in Academic Leadership: Experiences of Mid-Level Women Leaders in Universities and Colleges in the Mekong Delta (2012):** Traditional Vietnamese values, still heavily influenced by Confucian norms, continues to affect adversely not only men's but also women's perceptions of their potential, irrespective of their age. Even though women in this study had subtle desires to become leaders, none of them developed strategies to move up their career ladder or to hold senior leadership roles. Rather, they all became leaders "unintentionally." Changes are needed in gender policies and practices at the national, institutional, and individual levels; and there needs to be further research on the effect of parental encouragement on women seeking leadership, as well on the experience of women who reach senior levels in higher education in Vietnam

<sup>15</sup> Robert Funnell & Hien Chi Dao. (1 March 2013). Journeys to the top: women university rectors in Vietnam. *Gender in Management: An International Journal*, 28(5):308.

<sup>16</sup> Tran Thi Van Anh & Soma Chakrabarti Fezzardi. (2010). Assessing Gender Empowerment in Vietnam's Public Sector: 21.

## 2. ALUMNI PERSPECTIVES

The following section synthesises responses from the interviews and surveys for this study. Two definitional issues are discussed, before reporting on alumni responses to barriers and enabling factors. Discussion of barriers tended to be more detailed, in part because enabling factors were less evident or perceived as more difficult to implement. Quotes are taken from female alumni unless specifically noted.

### 1. Women's career and leadership aspirations

The topic of career and leadership aspirations for women provoked discussion of its own.

32% of the female alumni surveyed said that they were already in a senior position within their organisation. This was higher for men, with close to 50% reporting that they were already in senior positions. Interestingly, the survey of female alumni for this study revealed a strong desire among younger alumni to seek promotion. Of the 40% of respondents who said they plan to apply for a promotion, 77% of those were aged 34 years and below and 23% were aged 35 and above.

While a number of female alumni expressed their support for this study, with sentiments such as, 'every woman has the potential to be a leader in the workplace', as many women questioned its premise. In interviews, career aspirations were broader than a singular desire for promotion to leadership, with alternative aspirations including 'career fulfilment', 'work-life balance', and 'deepening technical expertise'. It was noted that some women don't choose to move up the ladder, and that, 'women don't necessarily need or want a higher position'. This was especially the case when a promotion (for instance between senior lecturer and head of department) amounted to a marginal increase in salary, but large allotment of workload. Building an academic profile was regarded by one female researcher as more feasible for women, and another female alumnus noted that there are many ways to contribute within an organisation without being senior or being the boss. Another noted that overseas study benefits women in their lives, even if it doesn't translate to promotion in the workplace. An exemplifying quote follows:

*'I am ambitious in my professional career, but I don't want to be a leader. So with the years I have left, I want to have a satisfying professional life, continue to acquire skills, and contribute well and be recognised by my peers and by good remuneration. The other dream is raising kids and being healthy. Professional fulfilment, rather than aiming for a professional position.'*

However, one woman did equate with seniority with influence, noting, 'I wanted to be a leader so that I could make changes in the workplace. For example, I introduced a merit-based examination of student dissertations. Previously, examiners gave a mark based on who was the student's supervisor.'

For a few, the question of seeking a promotion was vexed, sharing that they didn't think they should be a leader because they didn't have leadership skills, or not being interested but worrying that they would be 'overtaken' by the new generation if they didn't apply. One female alumnus also shared that she had wanted to do a PhD in Australia, but 'I worried that I would lose all of my networks and so the future would not be secure. So I chose to do a PhD in Vietnam instead.'

Obtaining a higher position was described as difficult because they are relatively few in number, and because the job market is very competitive in Vietnam, including between men. It was pointed out that in some small departments or organisations there is no room for promotion unless someone retires.

Importantly, one alumnus pointed out that promotion relies on two factors: that the workplace supports the promotion of women, but also that women themselves seek a promotion. Some women questioned whether Vietnamese women are encouraged to be ambitious, and another suggested that, 'women don't feel they can change their destiny.' Mention was made several times of women's mindsets being a barrier to seeking leadership, with the advice given that, 'women themselves need to break out of social rules and mindsets, and step away from traditional roles.' It was suggested that opening women's minds up to their potential for leadership was needed. The following stirring comment was posted on the survey form:

*'Changing Vietnamese women's own perception of gender equity both at home and at work is very important....all suggestions are great, but they won't be very effective until women themselves see the need to promote and advance themselves. An entrenched mind set in many Vietnamese women is that women should be happy at home looking after their family. While there is nothing wrong with this, a lot of women's talent won't be able to be utilized if capable women do not really want to make social changes in social perceptions of women's roles in family and in society.'*

In terms of workplace support for promotion, one woman remarked that for mid-management level, women have the same prospects as men for being promoted; but that at the very senior levels, men have more political power and networks and so are more successful. 41.5% of female alumni said that men receive greater support for promotion in their own organisation, as compared with 23.9% of male alumni who agreed with this statement.

The political nature of senior appointments in Vietnam was raised several times. However, one alumnus observed that women's access to leadership in public administration was improving, noting that, '10 years ago you would never have met a woman at Vice Director level, but you will now find women in their 30s at this level in the provinces.'

## **2. Sector and organisation type matters**

Despite the study focus on the public sector, many respondents underlined that women's career mobility differs between the public and private sector generally, and even based on the organisational type (quite aside from the individual managers and workforce within them). There was a consensus that female alumni working for I/NGOs and US/European multi-national corporations did not experience constraints in their career progression. These organisations were described as gender equitable and performance based and this was attributed to the existence of documented and clear HR policies and appointment practices, mostly influenced by global (i.e. western) standards. Women faced the greatest challenges to obtaining promotion within central government agencies. A couple of female alumni described their universities as patriarchal, male-dominated; but alumni from one university said that their president was open minded and supportive of men and women staff with overseas study experiences.

The implication of this finding is that women's prospect of career promotion is likely to be influenced by the culture of the sector or organisation-type and the HRD program needs to adapt its goals accordingly.

## ENABLERS AND BARRIERS

‘Having a wife is an economic privilege’. Annabel Crabb, *The Wife Drought*

*In 2011, a researcher from the University of Queensland completed doctoral study of the experiences of top male and female CEOs in Australia. The major difference he found between them was their domestic circumstances. He interviewed 30 male CEOs, and 28 of them had children and a stay-at-home wife. Of the 31 female CEOs he interviewed, only two had stay-at-home husbands and in both cases these men were self-employed.<sup>17</sup>*



### Barriers:

Women’s household responsibilities are universal, as the extract from the Australian study above suggests. In fact, women’s domestic lives and caring responsibilities was the factor most commonly raised in interviews to explain women’s lower aspiration and/or success in obtaining a senior role. The most important personal or household level barriers to women’s promotion were as follows: 59.2% of female alumni agreed that ‘work-life balance pressures’ were a leading factor, followed by 50.7% agreeing that it was because husbands were not involved in childcare.

*‘From my personal observation, what hinders women the most is the inequality in the perception of women’s roles in the family. If we find some ways to make women more confident in their marriage relationships, and men more respectful and understanding, it could be better.’*

The impact of women’s caring role on their careers was described in many ways. The first, and most compelling, was a psychological effect. One alumnus shared the Vietnamese saying that, ‘Behind every successful man, there is a woman. Behind every successful woman, there is a broken family.’ Pursuing career promotion was viewed as a woman ‘sacrificing’ her family to her personal ambition. It was explained that, ‘if something goes wrong with the marriage or the children, it is the woman’s fault’ – making the stakes discouragingly high for women. A successful career is pitted against being a successful wife and mother. These conflicting options would no doubt resonate with women in most countries, however these beliefs were noted as being very effective in deterring women from seeking promotion in Vietnam.

The second implication of a woman’s caring role is how the importance of her career is rated. Parents and spouses were described as questioning why a woman needed to pursue further study or a career promotion when they just needed to care for their family. It was said that, ‘many women also share these stereotypes’. A man’s professional development opportunities were also typically prioritised in household budgets.

*‘Women in Australia worry about when is the best time in their career to have kids; women in Vietnam worry about the effect of their career on their family.’*

A third implication of caring roles on women’s career prospects was purely practical. With an average of two children, and a government-initiated norm of 5 years for birth spacing, women could have between 5 – 10 years out of the workforce or working part-time. One key informant recounted how in the 1960s, the government provided child care so that women could work for the war effort and for industry; but it was privatised in the 80s and 90s – becoming expensive, and often being perceived as not safe. Child-care centres won’t accept a child under 18 months, and so women without access to other options need to stay at home.

<sup>17</sup> Drawn from Annabel Crabb. (2014). *The Wife Drought*.

By the time most women re-engage in their early 30s, there is a 5-10 year experience gap with their male peers. On this basis, even merit-based systems are not equitable for women.

Women's greater domestic workload in Vietnam also limits the amount of time for a woman to position herself to be competitive for promotion – through advanced English classes, wider technical reading, networking and professional development activities.

#### **Enablers:**

Female alumni were almost unanimous in citing that 'having a supportive spouse' was the top enabling factor for women at the personal and household level (87.9% agreed). This was followed by a woman's 'self-confidence' (81.5% agreed), with a much lower rating for the importance of 'family or in-laws who support the woman's career promotion' (32.7% agreed). Male alumni also agreed that a supportive spouse was the top factor (83.4% agreed).

Interviews somewhat qualified these results, with a number of alumni and key informants endorsing that where a husband is successful in his career, has a more senior position or earns more money in the private sector, then it is much easier for a wife to seek promotion. Quoting one alumnus: *I was lucky because my husband was a senior political and business leader, and so he wasn't threatened by me seeking a promotion.*

Exposure to the division of housework between Australian couples was noted by alumni. One man commented that he was 'struck by' how husbands were active in housekeeping, cooking and parenting. A woman also commented on how her accompanying husband observed that Australian men, 'cooked, cleaned and listened to their wives'. Husbands' greater participation in housework and child rearing in Australia was noted in contrast to Vietnam, and as an enabling factor for Australian wives' careers.



#### **Barriers:**

Surveyed alumni were asked to select the 5 leading workplace-level barriers to women's promotion. Women selected the following in order of importance: concern about the impact on the family (82.8% agreed); women have less time and access to professional networking and information (82.8%); inflexible working hours and conditions that are incompatible with family (68.5%); men have more access to informal socialising opportunities (63.5%); and the lack of structured mentoring and leadership career planning for women (56.9%). Men chose the same top 5 responses, although men were in marginally greater agreement that men's access to informal socialising was important (67.7%).

Interviews offered elaboration on these factors, as well as offering additional insights.

#### **Visibility with the 'boss':**

For seeking promotion, relationship and visibility with 'the boss' or senior management recurred as a crucial factor in interviews. Women cited examples of supportive managers, and sympathetic managers, and for the most part, the bosses described were male. It matters that bosses are male since it was described as 'awkward' for a woman to develop a close working relationship with a boss, and that it will also attract workplace gossip. Despite this, rapport with the boss is pivotal, particularly in the public sector.

Women are further disadvantaged from forming bonds with their bosses, due to the nature of socialising in the workplace. Men were described as drinking and going for 'bia hoi' with the boss, which allows access in relaxed circumstances. It is difficult for a woman to socialise with a boss in this way, especially a young woman. As one female researcher observed, 'If you bring issues to a meeting with the Rector, the results are

not good. If you bring issues to a drinking table, they can be discussed and resolved casually.’ Another female alumnus quipped that leadership courses and literature are useful for women, but that, ‘there is nothing in the leadership books about inviting people out for drinks as a way of being promoted’. In the words of one male alumnus, ‘sometimes a person can be very skilled and work very hard, but the top managers still may not know you’. ‘Informal networking with the boss is critical so that they can get to know about you, so that when they devise the list of potential leaders, they think of you.’

*‘One of the biggest problems that causes anger to us is unfair assessment, even on professional areas. Because we cannot go out for drinking, we do not have a strong relationship with any leader or we have no one to support us for a higher position, while those who do get promoted. This is really a problem, not only with the system but because it discourages many of us from devoting our lives for a better society.’*

Given the lack of documented recruitment practices and the centrality of the boss to senior appointments, women’s disadvantage in interacting with the boss has a direct bearing on promotion. Alternative, more comfortable options for women to engage with senior management are needed.

#### *Male hierarchies and cliques:*

Linked to the issue of bosses mostly being male is that male cliques form at senior levels. These gender ties are strong. Several interviews raised that, ‘men don’t want too many women at the highest levels’ and that, ‘Men trust each other. A male CEO wants a Deputy CEO that is also a man. If a man and woman have the same qualifications in applying for a promotion, a male will be better able to bond with his boss through drinking, karaoke and field trips’.

One woman suggested that it was more than a case of preferential treatment, and that sexism also prevails as a barrier to women reaching senior levels, observing that, ‘men support women’s involvement at the mid level, but they don’t support them moving to a position where they can decide things’.

Another face of this issue is that women lack senior female role models. Women don’t have many examples to draw from in the workplaces, to learn about possible pathways to leadership for women and how to perform in these roles once appointed. Women who succeed are considered exceptional, rather than being typical or auguring a change in appointment trends; and the marital status of women in senior positions was frequently speculated about in interviews. The respectful profiling of senior professional women would be of value.

#### *Time and mobility constraints on women:*

Additional to the household level factors explored above, workplace demands are often incompatible with women’s domestic and community responsibilities, thus making them less competitive for promotions. Awareness of women’s ‘divided focus’ means that management are ‘suspicious’ as to whether they could really devote themselves to the position.

Public sector roles in Vietnam often require considerable provincial travel, making it less attractive or feasible for a working mother to apply for these roles and to gain this experience. Travel also attracts gossip, with one group of women explaining that women who study or work away from home are referred to as ‘an unlocked bike at Hoan Kiem Lake’, with the implication being that they are easily stolen.

Through time constraints alone, women have limited opportunity for core and supplementary activities to build up their experience base and connections. This includes times for networking, international conferences, training and writing for publication. Women also have less access to information for self-learning. Flexi-working conditions are needed, along with leaders who recognise their legitimacy.

#### *Limited opportunities for gaining experience:*

A corollary of women’s limited time availability is that they have less access to practical experience and learning. Some interviews suggested that this affects women’s decision-making capacity, or at least their capacity as perceived by others.

*(Regarding infrastructure developments): ‘There is a perception that there is a difference in the decision-making capabilities of men and women. Women are strict and rigid, and sometimes cannot make a decision. Women have less experience, practical experience, whereas men can be more flexible and confident in negotiating and interpreting the laws. Women are more cautious and risk averse.’*

This was echoed in another interview, when a woman noted, ‘People don’t fully trust a woman in top leadership. They say women are mean, pay attention to small details’. Whether perception or reality, women are judged harshly by others and themselves. The experience gap needs to be bridged – whether practically, or simply in terms of women’s confidence and management techniques to negotiate this gap.

Presently there is a huge age gap between existing leaders and new appointments in the public sector. The generation of men that was born in the late 1950s is retiring and the next generation is having to step up to roles without handover. One key informant noted that, ‘When I was put in a leadership position, I didn’t know how to behave; for example, how to manage a meeting, and how to work with the generation gap within the public sector. The cohort from the 1950s is retiring and so we need to step up’. A woman may have professional skill, but management skill is essential for promotion.

#### *Internal recruitment practices:*

The final workplace-level barrier to women’s promotion is that the public sector does not use a documented performance based system. The Government has a 5-year forward staffing plan known as the *quy hoich can bo*. Candidates are shortlisted, but selection processes are not intended to be open and transparent, and criteria are very general. In practice, job descriptions may be designed once the person is promoted. Given the prevalence of male decision makers, and the workplace factors biased against women noted above, these closed recruitment practices were cited as a barrier for women.

Interestingly, Danang and Hoi An provincial governments have been trialling open recruitment processes, performance reviews – including a financial bonus for good performance, and conducting formal interviews for civil service positions. Both governments are believed to have many good HR policies. It would be interesting to evaluate whether these public administrations are more gender equal and supportive of women’s promotion as a result.

#### *Enablers:*

Female alumni broadly agreed on the top factors that made a workplace conducive to the promotion of women. The leading factors were that the workplace supported women to study overseas (91.8% agreed), that the supervisor was supportive of women’s career development (86.7% agreed), that the workplace had the presence of female role models in senior positions (73.1% agreed) and, to a lesser extent, that the workplace had gender targets or quotas (66.1% agreed). Male alumni identified the same factors as being most important. Membership of the Communist Party of Vietnam was rated as least important by both male and female alumni.

An additional enabler identified in interviews was for women to be comfortable in communicating their achievements. One female alumnus recounted how upon her return to Vietnam, ‘I took the initiative to communicate with my bosses and highlight what I could do with my new knowledge and skills. I was in their mind as a leader before I went to Australia, but promoting what I had learnt did help.’ Women in Vietnam are expected to be modest and demure, and so this can be difficult for many women. According to one woman:

*‘I received an outstanding award for my thesis, but I could not tell my boss because he would think I was showing off. We need help to be able to present our work and achievements to our bosses. Supporting women to be able to convey their skills and achievements is a priority for assisting their promotion.’*



### **Barriers:**

The final and most pervasive level to examine, affecting women's opportunities for promotion, is national policies, social norms and gender expectations. In the words of one key informant, 'the most important barrier is because they are women!'

Men and women were in agreement in ranking the leading national-level barriers to women's promotion. These were, in order of importance: the perception that a woman's role in society is to raise a family; the perception that only men make good leaders; and the view that a man's career is more important than a woman's. There were high levels of agreement (e.g. >70% of women and men agreed with each of these statements). Interestingly, only 50% of men and women agreed that the lower retirement age for women was an important barrier. However, it was frequently mentioned in interviews.

### *Leadership being synonymous with men:*

It is not unique to Vietnam that men are regarded as more fit for leadership. Several interviews raised this perception as a barrier for women, with the belief that men are 'more decisive, more determined, have a broader view and good foresight. Men can devote 100% to their work, and can go anywhere, anytime.' Given the barriers women face, male leadership is the norm and normalised, and their suitability for leadership is thereby reinforced. One male alumnus highlighted that the gender expectations of men to become leaders and be successful in their field is also a pressure on men.

Some alumni suggested that the acceptance of women in leadership roles is gradually changing, and that the gender equality law has been instrumental in raising awareness over the past 5 years or so on the capacity and entitlement of women to lead.

### *Lower retirement age for women:*

The most debated of the structural, policy-level factors – the early retirement age of women was seen as both a barrier and a reward for women. In the words of one key informant, 'Every woman who wants to be a leader knows that this is a barrier'. It was explained that the retirement age also results in an earlier cut-off age for training and promotion opportunities for women. According to MOHA regulations, the cut-off age for overseas training opportunities is 45 years for women, but 50 years for men; and for the in-service political training that is vital for promotion in public administration, the cut-off is age is 35 years for women and 40 for men. Organisations have the flexibility to keep women on beyond 55, but they cannot be on permanent contract and the workplace cannot pay social insurance. One alumnus suggested that women should be offered the choice and entitlements to stay on if she chooses.

According to a number of female alumni, this means that workplaces won't invest in woman after 40 – 45 years. By 45, the professional attainment of women is usually decided and so women's drive to seek promotion wanes at a time when an Australian woman is arguably regarded as coming into her professional prime. For some, the lower retirement age for women was seen as a 'reward'. Interviewees referred to women's poorer health due to child birth and rearing, and so felt the different retirement age was justified. Women were described by a number of alumni (of different ages) as 'not as strong as men', echoing the sentiment that women are the weaker sex. For others, the lower retirement age was not warranted, and several alumni pointed to women's 10 year longer life expectancy than men as proof.

One woman noted that Vietnam has, 'a lot of young people graduating and they should have access to jobs'. The retirement age allows young women to work, as older women assume the carer role for grandchildren. It is hard not to regard this as another expectation of women's sacrifice.

*Gender wage gap and parental leave laws:*

The final factors raised in interviews were the gendered wage gap and parental leave. With women's salary typically being lower than men's for equivalent roles, this creates a financial disincentive for a woman's career prospects to be prioritised within a household. Equalisation of wages and salary policies would mean that women can support their families financially, and be better placed to have her career prioritised. Vietnam has just increased maternity leave from 4 months to 6 months, but the country still does not have national laws on 'parental leave' or allowing days off for fathers. Again, this discourages a more equal sharing of child rearing responsibilities within households.

*'Social barriers prevents women from promotion. These barriers are renovated and recreated by women themselves, and by everyone in society. The new DFAT program should look into women empowerment and the involvement of male co-workers, husbands, supervisors of women to be part of the solution.'*

**Enablers:**

Literature was sparse on national level policies and norms that create an 'enabling environment' for women's promotion. Of the options provided to alumni in the survey, female alumni identified 'support for women's educational achievement' as the leading factor (90.3% of women agreed), followed by a 'strong gender equality framework' (85.2%) and 'national policies on gender equality targets and quotas' (79.4%). Male alumni also nominated these 3 factors, although they rated the strong gender equality framework as the most important enabler (86.3% of men agreed).

## RECOMMENDATIONS

As part of the survey, alumni were presented with the following list of recommendations for DFAT's new program and asked to select their top 5 choices:

	Women's top 5 choices (% in agreement)	Men's top 5 choices (% In agreement)
Information seminars on technical issues upon return to Vietnam	#4 (44.2%)	#5 (44%)
Support organisations to review their recruitment processes to be gender neutral	#3 (48%)	#4 (57.2%)
Support organisations to review workplace policies to support women better		#2 (59%)
Engage leaders within organisations in supporting women's career development planning	#2 (60.7%)	#1 (65.4%)
Convene networking events between senior and junior women in the same sector		
Convene networking events between women and leaders within organisations		
Offer short courses on leadership skills (public speaking, strategic thinking)	#1 (73.6%)	#3 (57.8%)
Offer short courses on work-life balance		
Offer short courses on career planning	#5 (40%)	
Profile successful women in senior roles		
Award and publically profile organisations that support women's promotion		
Internships to learn from women in senior positions		

Aside from some consistency in the endorsement of recommendations between women and men, the data from men is notable because it conveys their prioritisation of engaging leaders and workplaces to better support women. If they eventually become the leaders of the future, as is their gender destiny currently, this is promising for the issues raised in this study. It perhaps also reflects male alumni's exposure to different possibilities for professional women, through the experience in Australia. In the words of one male alumnus, 'If you want to change a man, send him to Australia to change his perspective.'

The full list of recommendations remains valid for exploration and canvassing during the design phase. However a number of qualifications and additions to this list were raised in interviews, as cited here:

- Good HRD practices from western countries are hard to apply. The best way to help change culture is for people to be exposed to organisational cultures and gender equality within Australia.
- The challenge with leadership training is that many women return to patriarchal institutions. However, women may be able to apply those leadership skills in other ways to Vietnam's development. For example, they could form associations, serve as mentors, or patrons to NGOs.
- Consider two stage leadership training for women: one course with a mixture of men and women so that they can share their ideas and aptitudes in a professional, non-competitive environment; and offer a dedicated component for women so that domestic responsibilities and gender issues can be discussed.
- The Government of Vietnam made the decision not to fund spouses on scholarships, but to fund more scholarships, however, there may be a case for considering extra costs for PhD scholars with children.
- Provincial areas need support but their English is not as strong as in the main cities.
- The main barriers to women's promotion are political and cultural, so consider what is realistic for an outsider.
- And lastly, 'I don't think that more training will help. It is not that we are not able to do the job. It is that it is a man's world.'

Potential options for the new HRD program to support women interested in leadership pathways and to promote gender equality generally are summarised in Table 3 below.

	Outline of option	Follow up during design
Component 1: Scholarships Program	Host pre-departure and reintegration seminars with scholars and their spouses/partners – counselling about separation or stress on relationship, work life balance, settling back into family life. Coffey held workshop on gender equality issues ‘How equal are we at home and at work’ in April 2014 and invited spouses. (59 alumni, 14 spouses).	Confirm current Coffey practice
Mainstreaming activities	Reconsideration of the DFAT requirement of a 3-year break between completion of Masters and application for Phd, since women have to contend with career breaks and earlier cut-off age for overseas training and retirement.	Discuss merits with HRD team and Coffey
	Expand the small grants scheme to include a funding stream for groups of alumni to undertake gender equality or female leadership activities in their own workplace.	Discuss merits with HRD team and Coffey
	AAV to continue to share information with alumni on fellowship programs and opportunities specific to women’s leadership.	Confirm current Coffey practice
	Reconsideration of sandwich PhD option to enable women with young children to consider applying.	Discuss merits with HRD team and Coffey
Component 1: Scholarships Program	Establish a competitive, certificated ‘Leadership Stream’ within annual scholarships round. Needs to be prestigious with Ambassador / Foreign Minister as patron. Scholars indicate an interest in career promotion at time of application. Leadership scholars receive: 1) pre-departure workshop on leadership and management (e.g. raising their awareness of leadership styles and techniques that may encounter in Australia); 2) mentor arrangement with a senior professional women in matching sectoral areas (politics, academia, industry), separate to supervisor; 3) short, end-of-study secondment within workplace of choice to observe female management style in practice; 4) scholars submit special report on experience and implications for their leadership plans; and 5) leadership and management workshop upon return to Vietnam, with option to invite supervisor to participate in selected sessions where they present on their study achievements and secondment findings. Women would have preferential access to this Leadership Stream.	Discuss merits with HRD team and Coffey. Idea elaborated from suggestion by Coffey Gender and Social Inclusion Adviser.
Dedicated components		Secondments may be easier to arrange for NGO or private sector scholars, to provide exposure to new management styles, techniques, delegation. It may be more difficult for government sector employees.
Component 2: Skills utilisation and enabling environment	Organise a calendar of skills building events, open to all alumni but responsive to issues women have raised in this study: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Organise seminar on communicating achievements comfortably, with a follow on workshop with alumni from HRD target institutions where awardees present the learning from their study to their workplaces.</li> <li>Offer career development planning support.</li> <li>Offer short course on public speaking and conference delivery skills. Public speaking training could be conducted by Ms Nguyen Thi Hang (alumnus famous for nuoc mam industry) or Ms Dr Dao Thi Thu Giang (Vice President of Hanoi Foreign Trade Uni)</li> <li>Offer short course on writing for publication.</li> <li>Offer short course on work-life balance, time and stress management.</li> </ul> Consider offering some of these courses within workplaces with clusters of female alumni to increase the participation of working mothers.	Indicative suggestions only. Alumni would need to be consulted for preferences at inception.
Mainstreaming activities		

	<p>Devise a special program offering for the select number of targeted public sector organisations (supported by dialogue to encourage uptake):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offer networking event for leaders of targeted organisations, with VIP Australian speaker. Include content about the new initiatives for women (leadership stream, Australia Day awards) to promote Australia's positive perception of women's capacity, and to support recognition of the potential contribution of female alumni.</li> <li>• Offer HRD program's facility to provide HRD and career planning, review of policies and procedures</li> </ul>	Some of these options may have a low likelihood of uptake, but tabling for discussion.
Component 2: Skills utilisation and enabling environment	<p>Consider package of support to Women in Politics and Public Administration (WiPPA) at the HCM National Academy of Politics and Public Administration.</p> <p>WiPPA was formally established as a gender mainstreaming and curriculum development centre within the academy in March 2013. They provide training to the political elite and senior levels of public administration (mostly male). With a staffing base of 6, and 2 additional staff pending, WiPPA is interested in collaborating with DFAT on promoting women's leadership capacity, entitlement and attainment within politics and the public sector in Vietnam. WiPPA's overarching plans, business model and budget needs to be examined.</p>	Discuss merits with HRD team, Coffey and UNDP
Dedicated components	<p>Host 'Inspirational Women Series' for outbound and returned female alumni:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Host panel with successful women from the public and private sector who can talk about how they confront the challenges of male hierarchies, negotiating careers with spouses, and of raising families. Series could include Ms Nguyen Thi Hang (female alumnus – Nuoc mam business); female CEO of ANZ Bank.</li> <li>• Host networking events between junior and senior women from different agencies, but the same sector.</li> <li>• Launch booklet and video on stories of successful female alumni and how they achieved this</li> <li>• Host networking event with successful Australian women in equivalent institutions (in coordination with Austrade and AEI's visitor calendar)</li> <li>• Host offsite management and leadership training for women: guest speakers, VIPS, women from public and private sector.</li> </ul>	Discuss merits with HRD team and Coffey
	Publically recognise the efforts of organisations taking measures for women publically through an Australia Day award for a target organisation supporting women's promotion, with Ambassadorial dinner invitation attached.	Discuss merits with HRD team and Coffey
	Conduct Cluster Study on impact of ADS experience on gender equality in the home and adjustment experiences, including women's own self-confidence, and changes in division of labour or status with husband.	Discuss merits with HRD team and Coffey
	Engage the Ambassador and Foreign Minister / Ambassador for Women and Girls in diplomatic dialogue with MOHA to equalise the retirement and training eligibility age for women.	Discuss merits with HRD team and Coffey

Table 3: Recommendations for promoting women's leadership in Components 1 & 2 of the HRD program

## ANNEXES

### Key Informant Interviews:

Mr Graham Alliband	Team Leader - Australia Awards Vietnam / Coffey International
Ms Cara Ellikson	Gender and Social Inclusion Adviser - Australia Awards Vietnam / Coffey International
Dr Frances Galache	Paz y Desarrollo (PyD), Vietnam
Ms Hoang Bich Ha	Paz y Desarrollo (PyD), Vietnam
Dr Khuat Thu Hong	Australia Awards Fellow / Institute of Social Development Studies, Hanoi
Dr Le Thi Thuc	Alumnus / PhD Research on <i>Femininity and Masculinity: The Dilemmas of Women in Political Leadership of Vietnam</i> . Based at Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics and Public Administration, Hanoi.
Dr Luong Thu Hien	Women in Politics and Political Administration (WiPPA), Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics and Public Administration, Hanoi.
Ms Jean Munro	UNDP Vietnam
Dr Ngoc Lan Thi Dang	Alumnus / PhD research on <i>Vietnamese women in academic leadership: Experiences of mid-level women leaders in universities and colleges in the Mekong Delta</i> . Based at Vietnam-German University, Binh Duong City.
Ms Nguyen Thi Thu Ha	Gender Equality Department, Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs
Ms Nguyen Thi Van Anh	Alumnus / Australia Award Fellow / Institute of Social Development Studies, Hanoi
Ms Tran Thi Van Anh	Deputy Director / Institute of Family and Gender Studies, Hanoi
Ms Trinh Thi Hoang Anh	National Committee for the Advancement of Women, Vietnam

### Alumni Interviews:

Ms Bui Le Thu	Ms Nguyen Thai Ha
Ms Dam Thi Phuong Thao	Ms Nguyen Thi Hoang Phung
Ms Dinh Nhu Anh	Ms Nguyen Thi Binh Son
Ms Do Van Anh	Ms Nguyen Thi Lan
Ms Doan Thi Khanh Hoa	Ms Nguyen Thi Lan Anh
Ms Doan Thi Ngoc Han	Ms Nguyen Thi Thuy Linh
Ms Duong Thi Thu Huong	Ms Nguyen Thi Tuong Van
Ms Hai Thi Quynh Anh	Mr Nguyen Van Duy
Mr Le Anh Tuan	Ms Tran Thi Thanh Ha
Ms Le Thi Anh Dao	Ms Tran Thi Thuy Anh
Mr Mai Duc Nghia	Ms Tran Thi Lan
Dr Ngo Tuyet Mai	Ms Tran Thi Minh Nguyet
Ms Nguyen Hong Hoa	Ms Tran Thu Thanh Ha

## REFERENCES:

### *DFAT Specific:*

- DFAT. (2014). Australia Awards Vietnam Alumni Tracer Study (draft)
- DFAT. (2014). Australia Awards Mongolia Women's Leadership Program (draft design document)
- DFAT. (2014). Australia Awards Vietnam – Annual Plan 2014-2015 (including Annex 4: Gender, Disability and Social Inclusion Strategy and Plan).
- DFAT. (2013). Australia Awards Alumni in Vietnam Cluster Study.
- DFAT. (2013). Human Resource Development Strategy 2014 – 2020.
- DFAT. (2013). Human Resource Development Strategy - Phase I: Situational Analysis.
- DFAT. (2012). Australian Scholarships for Development in Vietnam (ASDiV) Program: 3<sup>rd</sup> Monitoring and Evaluation Report.
- DFAT. (2011). Vietnam Tracer Study of Australian Scholarships Alumni.
- DFAT. (2010). Australian Scholarships for Development in Vietnam (ASDiV) Program. (including Annex 5: Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Strategy).
- DFAT. (2008). Vietnam ADS Post Award Monitoring Report.

### *General:*

- Committee for Economic Development of Australia (CEDA). (2013). Women in Leadership: Understanding the gender gap.
- Meredith Edwards et al. (2013). Not yet 50/50: Barriers to the Progress of Senior Women in the Australian Public Service.
- Robert Funnell & Hien Chi Dao. (1 March 2013). Journeys to the top: women university rectors in Vietnam. *Gender in Management: An International Journal*, 28(5):299-312.
- Government of Vietnam. National Strategy on Gender Equality for the 2011-2020.
- Institute of Family and Gender Studies (IFGS). (2009). Reports on Insights into Women's Leadership in Vietnam's Public Sector: Obstacles and Solution. UNDP, Hanoi.
- Institute of Sociology-Empowerment of Women in Public Sector Project (EOWP). (2009). Quantitative Research on Women's Leadership in Viet Nam's Public Sector. UNDP, Hanoi.
- Naila Kabeer et al. (December 2005). Preparing for the Future: Forward-looking Strategies to Promote Gender Equity in Viet Nam. World Bank & United Nations, Hanoi.
- Kristy Kelly. (2011). Gender Equality in Education: Looking Beyond Parity: Vietnam Case Study (Preliminary Findings) – Women in Educational Leadership and Management. An IIEP evidence-based Policy Forum - 3-4 October 2011. UNESCO, Paris.
- Ministry of Home Affairs & AusAID. (2005). Research on Gender Impacts in Career Paths of Civil Servants in Vietnam.
- Jean Munro. (2012). Women's Representation in Leadership in Vietnam. UNDP, Hanoi.
- Ngan Thi Thuy Le. (2011). How does culture impact on women's leadership in higher education? A case study in Vietnam. Master of Education dissertation for University of Waikato, New Zealand.
- Ngoc Lan Thi Dang. (2012). Vietnamese women in academic leadership: experiences of mid-level women leaders in universities and colleges in the Mekong Delta. Doctoral thesis dissertation submitted to Michigan State University, USA.
- Pippa Norris & Ronald Inglehart. (2008). Cracking the Marble Ceiling: Cultural barriers facing women leaders. Harvard University, Cambridge.
- Tran Thi Van Anh & Soma Chakrabarti Fezzardi. (2010). Assessing Gender Empowerment in Vietnam's Public Sector.
- UNDP. (April 2014). Women delegates in the Vietnam National Assembly: From Participation to Representation.
- UNDP. (undated). Policy Brief. Comprehensive Leadership Capacity Building in Vietnam – An Effective Way to Increase the Representation of Women.
- USAID. (November 2012). USAID Vietnam Gender Analysis.