

Study Abroad Scholarship Programs of the Republic of Vietnam (1950s-1970s): A General Assessment.

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Abstract:

This article presents an overview and assessment of the study-abroad scholarship programs implemented by the Government of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) from the 1950s to 1975. With the goals of modernizing the nation and cultivating a highly qualified professional workforce, the RVN sent thousands of outstanding students to advanced countries—primarily the United States, France, Australia, and Canada—to pursue strategic fields such as engineering, agriculture, medicine, education, and public administration.

The article analyzes the objectives, scale, organizational structure, and selection procedures of these scholarship programs, while also examining the main funding sources, including the national budget and aid from allied countries, particularly the United States. The study evaluates the achievements of the programs, such as the emergence of a Western-educated intellectual elite that contributed significantly to economic, social, and academic developments in South Vietnam.

In addition to successes, the article discusses the challenges and limitations of the programs, including issues of “brain drain” when some scholarship recipients did not return, as well as disruptions caused by wartime conditions. The article concludes by offering a comprehensive evaluation of the legacy and long-term impacts of these programs on Vietnam’s human resources both before and after 1975, affirming that these initiatives represented one of the most forward-looking and consequential human-capacity development efforts undertaken by the RVN government in former South Vietnam.

Keywords: *study abroad scholarships, developed countries, national budget, foreign aid, brain drain*

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Philosophical Foundations and Historical Context

The Educational Philosophy of “Humanism, Nationalism, Liberalism”: The Intellectual Foundation for RVN Study-Abroad Policy

The educational system of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN), which existed from 1955 to 1975, was shaped by a robust philosophical foundation built on three pillars: *Humanism*, *Nationalism*, and *Liberalism*.¹ This philosophy was not only the guiding compass for domestic education but also the intellectual basis that clearly informed and motivated the policy of sending outstanding students abroad.

Humanism emphasized the centrality of the individual, respect for human dignity, and the pursuit of holistic personal development. Individuals were regarded as ends in themselves-never as tools for any political party or organization. In education, this principle was expressed through respect for the autonomy of educators, minimal political interference, respect for each student's personality and abilities, and the provision of sufficient information for learners to make free and informed choices.

Nationalism stressed preserving and promoting traditional cultural values and national heritage. Education bore the responsibility of cultivating knowledge of national history, love of homeland, and mastery of the Vietnamese language, thereby building a strong national consciousness at a time when the country had just emerged from colonial rule and was facing division.

Liberalism was the outward-looking, modernizing pillar-directly shaping the rationale for study-abroad policies. It held that nationalism should not be equated with insularity; instead, education must remain open to modern scientific and technical knowledge, democratic ideals, and global cultural values. Its ultimate aim was national modernization and integration into global civilization.

Within the context of the Cold War, the principle of “Liberalism” carried not only educational significance but also geopolitical implications. The “world” from which the RVN sought knowledge was the Western bloc-led by the United States and Western Europe. Thus, sending students to these countries functioned as an instrument of soft power and a political statement of alignment with Western developmental models, in contrast to the socialist path pursued by North Vietnam.

¹ These principles (Humanistic, National, and Scientific/Liberal) were formally codified following the National Education Congress of 1958 and the 1964 National Education Convention. They remained the guiding directives for the Ministry of National Education throughout the Second Republic. See: Nguyen Thanh Liem, *Giáo dục ở miền Nam Việt Nam* [Education in South Vietnam] (Santa Ana: Lê Văn Duyệt Foundation, 2006).

As a result, study-abroad policy became a strategic tool for cultivating a future leadership cadre whose intellectual orientations aligned with the RVN's allies.

Nation-Building and the Urgent Need for Human Resources

Between 1955 and 1975, the RVN government faced a dual challenge: building a young state while simultaneously waging a war. Nation-building across all sectors—administration, economy, health, and education—demanded a corps of well-trained professionals, engineers, administrators, and scholars. Yet the inherited higher education system from the French colonial period remained insufficient to meet these urgent needs.

Modern university-level training capacity was limited, and upgrading domestic higher education to international standards required both time and significant resources. In this context, sending elite students abroad was not a luxury but a strategic imperative. It offered the most effective means of quickly filling the “human-capital gap,” producing a core intellectual workforce capable of operating the state machinery, fostering economic growth, and driving modernization.

Thus, study-abroad scholarships represented an urgent investment in the nation’s future.

The Shift from French to American Influence

Initially, RVN higher education inherited a deeply French academic legacy, visible in infrastructure, faculty composition, and curricular models. However, the expanding scale of American educational aid catalyzed a major shift. Between 1954 and 1974, the United States provided nearly USD 68 million (contemporary value) in educational assistance.

This support extended beyond funding: USAID collaborated with major U.S. universities—such as Michigan State University and the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point—to supply academic experts, technical assistance, and modern curriculum development.¹

As a result, a dual influence emerged:

* A distinctly French academic tradition, still dominant in the 1960s (e.g., France remained the top destination for RVN students in 1964)

* A rapidly expanding American model, especially in applied fields such as engineering, economics, agriculture, and public administration

¹ Notable examples include the Michigan State University Group (MSUG), which focused on public administration and police training (1955-1962), and later contracts with Ohio University (education), Southern Illinois University (elementary teacher training), and the University of Florida (agriculture).

This produced a hybrid higher education system-French in academic structure yet increasingly American in pragmatism and market orientation. Returning students carried these differing intellectual orientations into government service and academia, simultaneously complementing and sometimes diverging from one another.

The Study-Abroad Philosophy in “Chính đê Việt Nam”

The 1964 Saigon publication “Chính đê Việt Nam”-authored under the pseudonym Tùng Phong, widely believed to be a research group assembled by Ngô Đình Nhu-offered an influential conceptual justification for study-abroad policy.¹

The book argued that Vietnam’s path to modernization required cultivating a *creative nation* and a *creative social order*, one capable of generating new technological inventions, new intellectual paradigms, and new spiritual values. Economic takeoff, it claimed, would only occur when a genuinely creative class emerged.

From this perspective, the ultimate purpose of study-abroad programs was to foster a generation of professionals capable not just of applying existing knowledge but of *creating new knowledge*. The book criticized the mindset of studying abroad merely to obtain a foreign degree and secure a bureaucratic position upon return.

Though the authorship of the book remains uncertain, its conceptualization of national modernization as the pursuit of creativity was remarkably forward-looking for its time, even by contemporary development economics standards.

Policies and Mechanisms of Implementation

Organizational Structure: The Ministry of National Education and the Bureau of Overseas Study

To implement study-abroad policy in a systematic and institutionalized manner, the RVN government established the *Bureau of Overseas Study* (Nha Du học), a specialized agency under the Ministry of National Education. The existence of such a dedicated bureau demonstrates that overseas study was not an ad-hoc administrative activity but a formally structured process-reflecting the RVN’s broader aspiration to build a modern, professional public administration.

¹ *Chính đê Việt Nam* [Vietnam’s Main Theme] was published in Saigon in 1964. While attributed to Tùng Phong, it is widely regarded by scholars and contemporaries as the work of the Cần Lao Party’s ideologues, principally Ngô Đình Nhu and Dr. Lê Văn Đồng, reflecting the strategic vision of the First Republic regarding modernization and elite formation.

The Bureau of Overseas Study was responsible for managing the entire process: announcing scholarship opportunities in newspapers, receiving and evaluating applications, ranking candidates based on academic performance, and organizing competitive examinations. This administrative structure ensured that selection was governed by clear rules and transparent criteria, thereby identifying the most deserving students to represent the nation abroad.

Selection Procedures: The Primacy of Academic Merit

The selection of RVN scholarship recipients was grounded in a strong meritocratic ethos, with academic excellence serving as the principal criterion. The Baccalaureate II examination (Tú tài II)-equivalent to today's upper-secondary graduation exam-functioned as the primary and most decisive screening mechanism. The standards were exceptionally high.¹

Only students achieving top classifications were eligible for consideration.

* *Uu* (Excellent; 16/20 and above) and *Binh* (Good; 14/20 and above) qualified for review.

* *Toi uu* (Highest Distinction; 18/20 and above)-extremely rare-were often granted study-abroad placements without further testing.

* Those with lower classifications ("Binh thứ," "Thứ") had to sit for additional competitive examinations, typically in the foreign language corresponding to the host country (English or French).

This merit-based system ensured a high-caliber cohort of scholarship recipients and successfully produced a genuine intellectual elite. However, it also risked unintentionally disadvantaging students from economically disadvantaged families or rural areas, where educational resources could not match urban centers. Though the RVN Constitution mentioned assisting capable students lacking financial means, practical implementation likely fell short.

As a consequence, the recipient pool tended to be drawn from the urban middle and upper classes, which could reinforce existing social stratification within the intellectual community.

Political memoirs from the era repeatedly emphasize that scholarship selection under the Ministry of Education was not based on political background. For example, Truong

¹ The Tú Tài II (French: *Baccalauréat II*) was notoriously rigorous. In many years during the 1960s, the passing rate ranged from only 15% to 20%, making the pool of "Excellent" (*Uu*) and "Good" (*Binh*) students a highly exclusive demographic of the nation's youth.

Như Tảng—a Saigon intellectual who later joined the National Liberation Front—recounted that although *he* had gone to the jungle to serve the revolutionary cause, his daughter in Saigon still received an RVN government scholarship based purely on academic merit, without interference due to her father's political actions. Similarly, several Vietnamese students who later became leaders of anti-war and anti-RVN movements in the United States were themselves recipients of RVN government scholarships, again indicating the absence of political discrimination in scholarship allocation.¹

Major Programs and Popular Destinations

The Colombo Plan: A Gateway to Australia and the Commonwealth

In addition to scholarship programs offered by France and the United States, the Colombo Plan was among the most important and prestigious avenues through which RVN students studied abroad. Established in 1951 as an initiative for economic and technical cooperation in Asia and the Pacific, the Plan provided substantial opportunities for developing nations to send outstanding students to member countries.

Between 1956 and 1974, hundreds of top-tier South Vietnamese students received full scholarships to study in Australia and other Commonwealth countries.²

The selection process for the Colombo Plan was highly competitive. Initial screening was conducted by the Bureau of Overseas Study, based primarily on Baccalaureate results, and typically only students achieving *Uu* (Excellent) were considered. The RVN's active participation in the Colombo Plan reflected a far-sighted dimension of its foreign policy: diversifying human-resource partnerships and expanding diplomatic engagement beyond its principal allies.

In doing so, the RVN strengthened ties with influential states such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United Kingdom—reducing overreliance on any single partner and building a broader international network of cooperation.

¹ Truong Nhu Tảng, *A Vietcong Memoir* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985). Tảng served as the Minister of Justice for the Provisional Revolutionary Government but later became disillusioned and left Vietnam.

² The Colombo Plan for Cooperative Economic Development in South and Southeast Asia was a key soft-power initiative. For South Vietnam, Australia was the most significant partner, accepting roughly 500 students between 1958 and 1975. These students were often referred to as “Colombo students” (*sinh viên Colombo*), a title that carried high social prestige in Saigon.

United States Educational Aid: USAID Programs

Educational aid from the United States-mainly via USAID-had deep and systemic impacts on RVN human-resource development. These programs extended beyond scholarships. With USAID support, numerous cooperative projects were launched to reform and modernize higher education within South Vietnam.

USAID funded the overseas training of large numbers of RVN faculty members and students at top American universities. The overarching goal was to cultivate a new generation of professionals and leaders equipped with advanced managerial and technical knowledge to serve the country's development agenda.

American aid tended to prioritize fields viewed as essential for building a stable and prosperous allied state:

- public administration
- economics
- agriculture
- engineering
- public health

Consequently, USAID-funded scholarships and exchange programs guided RVN human-resource development toward these applied fields, aiming to address the practical needs of economic modernization and bureaucratic reform modeled after the U.S. administrative system.

Distribution of Vietnamese Overseas Students: The Dominance of France and the Rise of the United States

Statistical records reflect a clear pattern in the geographic distribution of RVN overseas students. In 1964, France remained the top destination, underscoring enduring historical, cultural, and linguistic ties. However, the number of RVN students in the United States was substantial and rising rapidly, mirroring American influence through extensive educational aid.

Alongside France and the U.S., other developed countries also welcomed South Vietnamese students, further diversifying the landscape of overseas education.

The most popular fields of study were the social sciences and engineering, revealing a dual strategy in RVN development policy: building a robust foundation in the humanities and social sciences while simultaneously cultivating technical experts essential for modernization.

Impacts and Outcomes (1955–1975)

Formation of a Western-Educated Intellectual Elite

The most prominent and lasting achievement of the RVN's study-abroad initiatives was the successful formation of a high-caliber Western-educated intellectual class. Thousands of scholarship recipients returned to Vietnam after completing their studies, becoming professors, physicians, engineers, lawyers, economists, and administrators who played key roles across social, academic, and governmental spheres in South Vietnam.

This new intellectual class brought back not only technical expertise but also modern ways of thinking, scientific work habits, and progressive cultural and social values derived from Western education. They became dominant drivers of modernization in South Vietnamese society, especially in major urban centers.

However, this transformation also had complex consequences. The infusion of Western lifestyles and values sometimes produced subtle tensions with traditional cultural norms. It also created a degree of cultural and intellectual distance between the elite urban intelligentsia and the broader rural population. These dynamics constituted one of the inherent challenges accompanying the RVN's project of "Liberalism" and international integration.

Contributions to Socioeconomic Development

The contributions of returnees to the socioeconomic development of the RVN were substantial and undeniable. They staffed key positions in government, universities, research institutes, hospitals, and the private sector, thereby improving the capabilities of public administration, education, healthcare, and scientific-technical sectors.

Beyond their professional roles, these individuals occupied a unique and indispensable position as intermediary agents. With strong foreign-language proficiency and a deep understanding of the cultures, political systems, and economies of allied nations, they were ideally positioned to absorb, interpret, and apply technical aid, managerial models, and advanced technologies.

In doing so, they served as catalysts for the effective transfer of knowledge and technology from developed countries to South Vietnam, greatly enhancing the overall impact of foreign assistance.

Long-Term Legacy

The fall of the Republic of Vietnam on April 30, 1975 abruptly ended all study-abroad programs. Thousands of students already overseas suddenly lost both their citizenship and their financial support, leaving them unable to return home.

As a result, the massive investments-by both the RVN and its allies-into human-resource development could not be “recovered” in their intended form. Instead, this entire pool of highly trained human capital was involuntarily transferred to host countries such as the United States, France, Australia, and Canada.

The stranded students, equipped with strong academic foundations and advanced technical skills, quickly integrated into their new countries and contributed to their development. The legacy of the RVN’s study-abroad programs thus unexpectedly became the foundation of a small but highly educated overseas Vietnamese community. From the 1980s onward, these experts often organized themselves into professional associations to support each other and maintain collaborative networks.

Concluding Remarks: A Comparison of Study-Abroad Policies in the DRV and the RVN

To obtain a comprehensive perspective, it is necessary to compare the study-abroad policy of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) with that of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) during the same historical period.

The DRV also prioritized sending students abroad, primarily to the Soviet Union and other socialist-bloc countries. The contrast between the two systems reflects the fundamental ideological divergence between the two states.

Destinations and Objectives

* RVN: Oriented toward Western countries—especially the United States, France, and Australia—to train experts capable of building a nation aligned with market-oriented economic models and an open society.

* DRV: Oriented toward the socialist bloc—especially the Soviet Union, China, and Eastern Europe—to train cadres for a socialist command economy and a state socialist bureaucracy.

Fields of Study

* RVN: Adopted a balanced approach, supporting training in technical fields, natural sciences, and also the social sciences, humanities, law, and public administration.

* DRV: Focused heavily on engineering, heavy industry, agriculture, and military-related fields, all directly tied to production and national defense. Social sciences and humanities received less emphasis.

Post-1975 Legacies

* In the RVN case, because of historical circumstances after 1975, many overseas-trained intellectuals were unable to return and instead became part of highly educated Vietnamese diaspora communities in the United States, France, Australia, and Canada.

* In the DRV case, most overseas graduates returned to Vietnam after completing their studies and became the backbone of scientific, technical, and bureaucratic reconstruction in the unified postwar state.

Thus, the study-abroad policies of the two regimes mirrored two contrasting developmental visions, two ideological frameworks, and two competing worldviews. Yet each, in its own way, contributed to shaping the long-term human-capital legacy of Vietnam today.

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