STUDENT MOBILITY

Many students enjoy international learning experiences as part of their degrees, and Vietnam has proved to be a popular destination in recent years.

During Summer Semester 2013, 20 students from the School of Geography, Planning and Environmental Management travelled to the Mekong Delta as part of a new course, developed in conjunction with Can Tho University, that aims to teach students about the social, urban, rural and environmental issues facing communities in the region. This was the second cohort of students to participate in the course, with the inaugural group travelling to Vietnam in 2012.

Ten students from Health and Rehabilitation Sciences completed a five-week clinical placement in Hue last year, working with disabled children in schools and orphanages. During their placement, the group ran workshops, created playground areas and worked closely with local teachers, carers and parents.

Also in 2012, ten journalism students travelled to Hanoi to take part in an intensive 10-day field reporting course, where they generated stories that were further developed on their return to Australia and later broadcast on Vietnam Television, ABC News Breakfast, ABC News 24 and ABC Local Radio.

RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

Senior researchers are working with the Government of Vietnam and other Vietnamese institutions to tackle some of the region’s most pressing health issues.

Professor Matt Cooper from the Institute for Molecular Bioscience, together with Paul Young from the School of Chemistry and Molecular Bioscience and Stephen Mahler from the Australian Institute for Bioengineering and Nanotechnology (AIBN), are leading a project to develop a cheap, simple test for diagnosing dengue fever.

Involving researchers, hospitals and healthcare workers in both Australia and Vietnam, the project aims to develop a best-in-class field test for early detection of dengue fever, and a sensitive and accurate lab-based test for screening blood donations.

Cooper said early, accurate detection was vital both for limiting transmission and ensuring clinicians can help identify cases that may progress to potentially lethal dengue haemorrhagic fever.

“Globally, only about three per cent of people infected with the virus are currently being diagnosed accurately,” he said.

Professor Anton Middelberg and Dr Linda Lua, also from AIBN, are working on a pilot study in vaccine development for pre-pandemic avian influenza (H5N1), with evaluation to be conducted in collaboration with partners including the Pasteur Institute in South Vietnam and Vietnam National University in Hanoi.

The development work at AIBN is using fast-growing bacteria to produce virus-like particles (VLPs), which are shells of the virus that contain no genetic material. This means they can elicit a strong immune response but are inherently safe.

Initial results show that the VLP technology can be tailored to emerging influenza strains and potentially mass deliver vaccines in weeks rather than months, stopping a virus from causing a pandemic.

Middelberg said the collaboration with Vietnam was an important step in developing the VLP technology.

“We need to prove the efficacy of the VLP technology. Our collaboration with researchers in Vietnam provides information on emerging strains and testing under real-world conditions,” he said.

Research undertaken by the School of Population Health, as part of a project funded by The Atlantic Philanthropies, has also resulted in significant outcomes in Vietnam, including improved mortality data collection systems; the first National Burden of Disease study, which highlighted stroke as a major cause of disease burden; and studies into tobacco, cardiovascular disease, alcohol, schizophrenia and diabetes, with direct implications for Vietnamese health policy.