

Educational cooperation as a pillar of Vietnam-Japan relations: The case of Vietnam Japan University

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Abstract:

Since the twentieth century, Vietnam-Japan relations have evolved through periods of tension and cooperation, with a sustained emphasis on partnership and development. While existing scholarship has focused primarily on economic, political, and diplomatic dimensions, educational cooperation - particularly in higher education - remains comparatively underexplored. This article addresses this gap by analysing educational cooperation as a structured component of Vietnam-Japan relations through the case of the Vietnam Japan University (VJU). Drawing on a qualitative case-study approach and document analysis, the study examines how policy commitments, resource allocation, and joint governance are translated into institutional design and measurable outcomes. The findings indicate that educational cooperation at VJU operates as an institutionalised mechanism linking diplomatic intentions with human resource development, reflected in governance structures, partnership networks, and academic outputs. At the same time, the case reveals constraints related to governance complexity, financial sustainability, and cross-cultural integration. By situating VJU within broader frameworks of education diplomacy, soft power, and higher education internationalisation, the article contributes to the literature by demonstrating how educational cooperation can function as a structured and operational “pillar” of bilateral relations, while also highlighting its context-dependent limitations.

Keywords: education, international cooperation, Japan, Vietnam, Vietnam Japan University.

Classification numbers: 3.1, 5.2, 5.3

1. Introduction

The historical relationship between Vietnam and Japan in the twentieth century has experienced many ups and downs. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Japan was a model for Vietnamese patriots seeking national liberation [1]. However, by the late 1930s and early 1940s, the two sides stood on opposing fronts: the Allies and the Fascists. In the latter half of the century, Vietnam's division and prolonged struggles for national defense, coupled with intense power competition among major nations during the Cold War, significantly influenced the dynamics between Vietnam and Japan. Although they were no longer enemies, the journey towards becoming partners in a unified Vietnam would take several decades. The establishment of diplomatic relations between Japan and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in 1973 was a pivotal event [1]. This milestone not only highlighted the goodwill and cooperation aspirations of both countries but also signified a broader shift in international relations, from confrontation to cooperation.

Over the past 52 years (1973-2025), the relationship between Vietnam and Japan has seen periods of strong cooperation, as well as times marked by tension and misunderstanding. However, the commitment from both countries to mend and enhance their relationship is apparent. One significant avenue of connection, particularly during the most challenging times, has been in the field of education, especially higher education. The progression of the relationship from a strategic partnership in 2009 to a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2023 is both a catalyst for further enhancing cooperation in higher education and a result of ongoing collaborative efforts in this area [2].

Regarding educational cooperation between Vietnam and Japan, several studies have been published on the topic. The book “Quan hệ văn hoá, giáo dục Việt Nam-Nhật Bản và 100 năm phong trào Đông Du” [Vietnam-Japan cultural and educational relations and 100 years of the Dong Du movement], edited by Nguyen Van Khanh, focuses on two primary issues: (1) Vietnam-Japan cultural and educational relations, and (2) the Dong Du movement and

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its influence on the Vietnamese revolution [3]. The article “Hợp tác giáo dục và đào tạo nguồn nhân lực giữa Việt Nam và Nhật Bản” [Educational cooperation and human resource training between Vietnam and Japan] by Ngo Huong Lan, published in the *Northeast Asia Research Journal*, reviews the significant achievements in educational cooperation between Vietnam and Japan across various levels, including primary education, secondary education, higher education, and human resource training [4]. K. Yoshida’s (2009) [5] research report, titled “Japan’s international cooperation for educational development: Review of prospects for scaling up Japan’s aid to education”, analyses Japan’s role in supporting the education sector in developing countries, including Vietnam, through Official Development Assistance (ODA) from 1991 to 2000. The article “Hợp tác Việt Nam-Nhật Bản trong lĩnh vực giáo dục và đào tạo nguồn nhân lực” [Vietnam-Japan cooperation in the field of education and human resources training] by Hoang Minh Loi, also published in the *Northeast Asia Research Journal*, examines the relationship between Vietnam and Japan in educational cooperation and human resources training at various levels, including cooperation between governments, schools, research institutes, centres, organisations, and individuals [6]. Two additional studies, “From oriental studies to South Pacific studies: The multiple origins of Vietnamese studies in Japan, 1881 to 1951” by Frederic Roustau (*Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, 2011) and “From ‘Ideal Social Model’ to Reality: Vietnamese Studies in Japan” by Hisashi Shimojo (*Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, 2021), clarify the origins and development of Vietnamese Studies in Japan, which is a significant aspect of educational cooperation between the two countries [7, 8]. Upon reviewing these works on Vietnam-Japan relations, it is evident that the field of educational cooperation has attracted the attention of scholars from Vietnam, Japan, and internationally. This body of literature establishes that educational cooperation constitutes a meaningful and multifaceted component of Vietnam-Japan relations, encompassing historical exchange, policy coordination, and institutional collaboration. However, the number of publications on this topic is modest compared to research in other fields, such as economics, politics, and diplomacy.

Subsequently, exploring the cooperative relationship between Vietnam and Japan through higher education provides valuable insights into the ties between the two countries, particularly in an area that has not been extensively researched. This examination allows for a deeper understanding of the role of education in fostering connections between Vietnam and Japan. Historically, collaborative efforts in education have been consistent, and in the twenty-first century, these activities have become one of the fundamental pillars of the relationship. Analysing the partnership through the lens of the Vietnam Japan University (VJU) serves as an ideal case to illustrate the

close educational ties and the shared commitment to higher education between the two nations in this century. Building on this perspective, the study is guided by two central questions: How does educational cooperation, via VJU, operate as a “pillar” of Vietnam-Japan relations, and to what extent is this role visible in institutional design and outcomes?

Beyond documenting VJU’s establishment and milestones, this study makes three original contributions. *First*, it advances a conceptual model that frames educational cooperation as a structural pillar of Vietnam-Japan relations rather than a derivative outcome. *Second*, it elucidates the causal mechanism through which diplomatic commitments, ODA allocation, and joint governance are translated into institutional practices and outcomes at VJU. *Third*, the study provides systematic, longitudinal evidence linking policy intentions to operational performance, offering an evaluative perspective on the effectiveness and limitations of the joint-university model as an instrument of bilateral cooperation.

2. Theoretical framework and methods

2.1. Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in three interrelated theoretical lenses to explain how educational cooperation functions as a strategic component - a “pillar” - of Vietnam-Japan relations. *First*, the concept of education diplomacy positions higher education not merely as a sectoral activity but as an instrument through which states pursue broader diplomatic goals. Education diplomacy emphasises policy coordination, knowledge exchange, and people-to-people connectivity as mechanisms for building long-term trust and political alignment [9, 10]. Within this framework, VJU can be interpreted as a diplomatic platform through which both countries institutionalise mutual commitment and project shared strategic visions for Asia’s future.

Second, soft power theory provides a useful lens for understanding Japan’s long-standing investment in human resource development in Vietnam. Japan’s ODA allocations, training programs, and support for VJU reflect a deliberate strategy to strengthen influence through attractiveness - via technology transfer, academic quality, and cultural engagement - rather than coercive means [9, 11]. Vietnam, for its part, views educational cooperation as a pathway to enhance national capacity, modernise science and technology, and cultivate a generation of leaders familiar with Japanese culture, governance, and professional norms.

Third, the internationalisation of the higher education framework helps explain VJU as a form of cross-border or joint university, in which curriculum co-design, shared governance, and international mobility serve broader foreign policy objectives. Joint universities are increasingly interpreted as hybrid institutions that facilitate knowledge co-creation while reinforcing bilateral partnerships [12-14].

Analytically, the designation of education as a “pillar” is operationalised through three observable dimensions: (1) its explicit elevation in high-level joint statements; (2) the sustained allocation of Japanese ODA to human resource development; and (3) its symbolic role - as exemplified by VJU - in embodying mutual trust, long-term commitment, and a shared vision for cooperative development. Within these theoretical frames, VJU emerges as both a diplomatic tool and a strategic mechanism for shaping future generations and sustaining the Vietnam-Japan partnership.

To ensure systematic application of these theoretical lenses, the study employs the analytical framework summarised in Table 1, linking concepts to observable indicators and empirical evidence.

Table 1. Analytical framework: Concepts, indicators, and evidence.

Concepts	Operational indicators	Evidence
Education diplomacy	Inclusion in joint statements; institutional co-governance	VJU named in bilateral strategic documents; joint council structure
Soft power	Human resource investment; cultural-academic diffusion	ODA-funded faculty, Japanese curriculum elements
Internationalisation of higher education	Joint programs; faculty mobility; Q&A standards	Binational teaching staff; international accreditation

Source: The author's compilation.

This framework is subsequently used to structure the empirical analysis, allowing the study to assess how each theoretical dimension is institutionalised through governance, staffing, curriculum design, and measurable outputs, rather than relying on chronology alone.

2.2. Methods

To address the research objectives, this study combines historical and logical methods, supported by several interdisciplinary approaches to ensure analytical rigour and data credibility. The historical method is applied to trace the formation and development of VJU within the broader political-diplomatic context and the evolution of higher education reforms in both countries. This approach systematises key events, decisions, and cooperative activities from 2006 - when the initial idea of VJU emerged - through 2025, allowing the study to identify the motivations, conditions, and contextual factors shaping the bilateral university model.

In parallel, the logical method is applied to examine the major transformations in the cooperation mechanism, institutional structure, and operational outcomes of VJU. This method clarifies how the strategic objectives of Vietnam and Japan are translated into practice at VJU, thereby enabling a structured assessment of effectiveness, achievements, and remaining limitations.

In addition to the primary methods, the study employs complementary approaches. Document analysis and synthesis establish the evidentiary basis for evaluating policies, the cooperation model, and institutional performance. Policy analysis and statistical methods are used to trace policy changes in both countries and assess their impact on bilateral higher education cooperation. Quantitative data further illustrate the scale, characteristics, and developmental trajectory of cooperation from inception to operation.

The research draws on a wide range of sources, including primary documents from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) reports, and VJU's internal data, as well as secondary sources such as monographs, scholarly articles, conference papers, and publications from relevant institutions. These materials were systematically collected, classified by source and theme, and analysed using qualitative document analysis and content analysis. Primary and secondary sources were cross-examined to reconstruct the development of Vietnam-Japan educational cooperation, identify policy and institutional changes, and evaluate VJU's governance and operational outcomes, thereby enhancing the reliability of the findings through source triangulation.

3. Vietnam-Japan educational cooperation: Historical roots and strategic drivers

In the early twentieth century, Japan served as an inspiration for colonised countries, such as Vietnam, seeking liberation. Vietnamese students and intellectuals responded to the call of patriot Phan Boi Chau by studying in Japan, leading to the Dong Du movement - a significant trend of Vietnamese students traveling to Japan for education [3]. In the late 1960s, as the Vietnamese national liberation struggle surged, a new generation of Japanese intellectuals emerged in opposition to U.S. war policy and to the cooperation between the U.S. and Japanese governments, giving rise to the influential citizens' movement known as Beheiren [15]. This opposition arose from a deep sympathy for the nationalist movements in Southeast Asia, particularly Vietnam.

From the late 1960s to the early 1970s, the unexpected détente in U.S.-China and U.S.-Soviet Union relations, as well as the oil crisis, were also among the reasons leading to a change in Japan's foreign policy towards Southeast Asia in general and Vietnam in particular [1]. Japan desired to implement a more independent foreign policy, and Japan's official establishment of diplomatic relations with the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in parallel with maintaining allied relations with the U.S. and the Republic of Vietnam can be seen as one of the concrete manifestations of Japan's independent foreign policy.

Although diplomatic relations were officially established in 1973, the relationship between the two countries did not have the conditions to develop from 1973 to 1975. It was only after 1975 that the relationship began to improve gradually. In October 1975 and January 1976, Vietnam and Japan exchanged embassies in each other's capitals. The two sides engaged in negotiations to address outstanding issues from the past, which included signing agreements concerning postwar economic cooperation and compensation arrangements, provided in the form of non-refundable aid totalling 13.5 billion Yen (equivalent to approximately 45 million USD) [15]¹. On May 19, 1975, the Japan-Vietnam Science and Technology Exchange Association was established to promote scientific and technological exchanges between the two countries.

During his visit to ASEAN countries in August 1977, Japanese Prime Minister Fukuda delivered a speech on Japan's Southeast Asia policy in Manila, known as the Fukuda Doctrine. The Doctrine declared Japan's resolve to never again become a military power and to strive to strengthen its relations with the nations of Southeast Asia [16]. Fukuda also emphasised Japan's willingness to increase economic assistance to ASEAN nations and to promote "heart-to-heart" human relations [15].

Between the late 1970s and the 1980s, Japan suspended official relations and the aid it had pledged to Vietnam due to incidents in Cambodia. However, exchanges between the two countries began to resume in 1986, highlighted by Vietnamese Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach's visit to Japan in October 1990. Subsequently, Japanese Foreign Minister Nakayama visited Vietnam in June 1991 [1].

Between 1992 and 2002, the relationship between Japan and Vietnam developed rapidly. Japan increasingly embraced dialogue and cooperation for mutual development, leading to a stronger interdependence between the two countries on both global and regional scales. Additionally, Japan shifted its foreign policy from closely aligning with the U.S. and Western countries to a "return to Asia" strategy aimed at enhancing its influence in the region. The regional context also created favourable conditions for Japan to act as a bridge between ASEAN and Vietnam, in alignment with the spirit of the Fukuda Doctrine established in 1977 [1]. On the Vietnamese side, the country adopted an open foreign policy that focused on diversifying and multilateralising international relations. Vietnam aimed to establish friendships with all nations to maximise external resources for its national construction and development. As a result, Japan emerged as one of Vietnam's key partners.

¹The grant was divided into two periods. The first instalment of 8.5 billion Yen (approximately 28 million USD) was awarded in the fiscal year 1975, while the remaining 5 billion Yen (around 17 million USD) was granted in 1976.

During this period, several meetings took place between Vietnam and Japan. On the Vietnamese side, the notable visits included Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet to Japan in March 1993, General Secretary Do Muoi's trip to Tokyo in April 1995, National Assembly Chairman Nong Duc Manh's visit to Japan in December 1995, and Foreign Minister Nguyen Manh Cam's journey to Japan in May 1997. From the Japanese side, Prime Minister Murayama visited Vietnam in August 1994, followed by Prime Minister Hashimoto in January 1997. Additionally, Japanese Foreign Minister Ikeda travelled to Hanoi in July 1996, and Japan's Defence Agency Director Kyuma made an official visit to Vietnam in January 1998 [1]. The exchanges between the legislative bodies of both countries also strengthened during this period through mutual visits from delegations of the Vietnamese National Assembly and the Japan-Vietnam Parliamentary Friendship Alliance.

This period marked several important milestones that demonstrated the strengthening of the relationship between Vietnam and Japan, laying the groundwork for enhanced cooperation in higher education between the two countries. In April 2002, Vietnam and Japan established a framework for a "reliable, long-term, stable partnership". Following the upgrade of their relationship to a "Strategic partnership for Peace and Prosperity in Asia" in 2009, Japanese Foreign Minister Masahiko Komura remarked, "One of the most important factors in realising the Vietnam-Japan strategic partnership is people-to-people exchange" [17]. This statement emphasised the importance of enhancing cooperation in areas such as culture, science and technology, education and training, and youth exchanges. Additionally, it highlighted the need to respect each other's cultural traditions and collaborate on the preservation of cultural heritage. Following this event, the first VJU Rectors' Association was convened in Hanoi, bringing together representatives from universities and government organisations from both countries. In March 2014, President Truong Tan Sang and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe signed a Joint Statement that upgraded the Vietnam-Japan strategic partnership to the new level of an "Extensive Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity in Asia".

In recognition of the remarkable achievements in the bilateral relationship over the past 50 years (1973-2023), and with a strong belief in the promising future of cooperation between the two nations, President Vo Van Thuong and Prime Minister Kishida of Japan agreed to issue a Joint Statement on upgrading the Vietnam-Japan relationship to "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity in Asia and the World" at the talks on November 27, 2023. This agreement underscores the commitment of both countries to enhance cooperation across all sectors and explore new areas of collaboration.

With the upgrading of diplomatic relations, cooperation between Vietnam and Japan in higher education has strengthened significantly. In March 2008, Vietnam and Japan signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in Tokyo, which outlined Japan's assistance to Vietnam in training 1,000 PhD candidates by 2020 [18]. In March 2014, the Strategic Program for Educational Cooperation between Vietnam's Ministry of Education and Training and Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology was approved [19]. Under this program, Japan committed to actively support Vietnam in human resource development, promote Japanese language education in Vietnam, and establish vocational skills standards. Both countries agreed to continue enhancing exchanges among universities, students, and researchers to foster mutual understanding between the younger generations, thereby contributing to the advancement of Vietnam-Japan relations. In October 2018, Vietnam and Japan signed another MoU aimed at reducing the number of international students who violate laws in Japan [20]. In November 2021, the Prime Ministers of both countries agreed to review progress in eight areas of cooperation, including cultural and educational initiatives [21]. On April 28, 2025, a new MoU was signed between Vietnam's Ministry of Education and Training and Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology [22].

Taken together, these developments illustrate the gradual consolidation of educational cooperation along three analytical dimensions: formal policy recognition, sustained investment through ODA and institutional programs, and increasing institutionalisation through bilateral initiatives. This trajectory establishes the structural conditions under which projects such as VJU can be understood not as isolated initiatives, but as institutional embodiments of a broader strategic alignment.

4. Building a shared vision: Vietnam-Japan cooperation in the university's formation process

The initiative to establish VJU began in 2006 when Vietnam's Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung reached out to the Japan-Vietnam Parliamentary Friendship Alliance concerning human resource development. This initial proposal can be interpreted as an early diplomatic signal that framed higher education as a strategic instrument for long-term bilateral cooperation rather than a standalone educational project [23]. In October 2006, Prime Ministers Shinzo Abe and Nguyen Tan Dung signed the Japan-Vietnam Joint Statement, in which the construction of the Hoa Lac Hi-Tech Park was included as one of three main cooperation projects between the Japanese government and Vietnam [23]. The explicit linkage between high-technology infrastructure and educational development in this statement illustrates how human resource training

was embedded within broader economic and technological cooperation agendas.

In 2012, the establishment of VJU was discussed with representatives from Japan's leading universities, including the University of Tokyo, Kyoto University, Osaka University, the University of Tsukuba, Nagoya University, Waseda University, and several other research-intensive institutions. Their participation demonstrated a deliberate effort to mobilise Japan's leading academic resources at the design stage, reinforcing the interpretation of VJU as a flagship project of education diplomacy rather than a conventional capacity-building initiative. At the beginning of 2013, JICA initiated the "Vietnam Japan University Project Information Collection and Confirmation Survey" to gather information related to the Vietnam Japan University Project [23].

The basic principles for building VJU were defined as follows:

- "1. To provide a high-quality education capable of studying at leading Japanese universities;
2. To provide practical education based on Japanese technologies and experiences;
3. To establish the university in accordance with the current cooperation of universities of both countries;
4. To respect the initiatives of each university;
5. To implement lectures and human resource training in Japanese language, principally as well as in English" [23].

Analytically, these principles operationalise the dual objectives of educational quality assurance and cultural-institutional transfer, which are central indicators of soft power deployment through higher education.

In the preparation stage, the University aims to accommodate 6,000 students, with 2,200 students in Natural Sciences and approximately 3,800 students in Humanities and Social Sciences. Japanese experts and advisors involved in the project explained that the modest initial enrolment numbers are intentional. Rather than signalling limited ambition, this approach reflects a quality-oriented development strategy prioritising institutional credibility and long-term reputation over rapid expansion. Additionally, there are plans to expand related activities, including collaborations with private companies, the establishment of research laboratories, and the construction of experimental facilities. It is also crucial to consider the additional space required for training programs aimed at producing highly qualified specialists and technical experts from the outset [23].

In the early years, the University constructed a campus in Hoa Lac Hi-Tech Park. This campus serves as a centre for research laboratories, industry-academia collaboration,

and human resource training for specialists. Meanwhile, the Vietnam National University (VNU) campus is dedicated to education and basic research, with a satellite campus established in Hanoi. This spatial and functional division reflects an intentional institutional design aligning applied research and industry engagement with national innovation priorities, while preserving VNU's traditional strengths in foundational education and research. To finance the construction of the University, a combination of funding sources has been utilised. This includes a substantial ODA fund provided by the Japanese Government, land offered by the Vietnamese Government, as well as additional funding from bank financing, donations, and investments from companies. The mixed financing model further underscores the hybrid nature of VJU as both a public diplomatic project and an institution oriented toward long-term sustainability.

VJU, operating under the umbrella of VNU, was established to offer a range of natural science and humanities courses. Initially, its curriculum included subjects such as Science and Technology, Medical Care and Nursing, Medicine, Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, Economics and Management, Law, and Japanology, along with the Japanese language. After the first ten years, VJU expanded its scope to encompass four schools and faculties, including graduate schools. The education programs at VJU are designed to leverage the strengths of its partner universities in Japan while also addressing the social needs of Vietnam and other countries in the region.

Institutional sustainability, however, depended not only on physical infrastructure and funding but also on an effective governance model capable of coordinating multiple stakeholders. The project planning stated that VJU should be established under a strong authority with adequate autonomy of the University. The secretariat of VJU should have the responsibilities for the total process of construction of VJU and should be in charge of matters such as the formation of university courses for undergraduates and post-graduates, the fiscal plan, the formation and execution of the budget, and coordination with the VJU Fund. As for the curriculum formations and the recruitment of professors and staff of the University, those will be mostly treated by the Japanese universities in charge of the administration and management, or by the VJU secretariat. In the cooperation and integrated developments with VNU-Hanoi, VJU will promote the recruitment of Vietnamese staff, including lecturers and management staff, and will train them for the purpose of shifting most jobs of the University to Vietnamese as soon as possible [23]. This governance arrangement institutionalises joint decision-making while embedding a gradual localisation strategy, thereby balancing international academic standards with national ownership.

Japanese universities played an essential role in preparing the academic and training components of VJU across multiple disciplines. Leading institutions such as the University of Tokyo, Kyoto University, Osaka University, Nagoya University, the University of Tsukuba, and Waseda University supported programme development across science and technology, medicine, agriculture, economics, law, and Japanese studies [23]. The disciplinary allocation of Japanese partner universities demonstrates a targeted transfer of expertise, aligning Japan's academic strengths with Vietnam's development priorities.

During the preparatory stage, Japanese and Vietnamese experts clearly identified the unique characteristics of the VJU, distinguishing it from traditional universities in Vietnam as well as from international collaborative institutions like the Vietnam-German University and the Vietnam-French University. According to the project plan, VJU was conceived as an autonomous member of VNU-Hanoi that would benefit from interdisciplinary collaboration and shared academic resources while maintaining close cooperation with leading Japanese universities. The model emphasised institutional autonomy, enabling the university to capitalise on VNU-Hanoi's multidisciplinary structure, extensive interconnection among its member institutions, and the active participation of Japanese universities. VJU was designed as an applied-science-based university that has connections with private-sector enterprises. Its curriculum integrates education, research, and knowledge transfer to serve both Vietnamese and Japanese companies, especially Japanese enterprises in Vietnam [24]. This statement articulates VJU's positioning as a hybrid institution that simultaneously leverages domestic academic networks and intensive international participation, a defining feature of joint-university models.

The decision to use English, Vietnamese, and especially Japanese as languages of instruction is due not only to survey findings on learners' preferences, but also reflects the international character of the university, the connection between the two countries, and the university's commitment to VJU students both during and after their training. As stated in the final report of establishing the VJU, "it is important to have a basic knowledge of the Japanese language, to have the behaviour and values that fit into a Japanese company and to have some knowledge of Japanese arts and culture. In this regard, it is important for students to have a culturally diverse experience, to be able to take classes on Japanese arts and culture, and to have access to a study abroad program at Japanese universities, which will be a good entryway into internships with leading multinational Japanese companies" [24]. It can be said that, language policy at VJU functions as both a pedagogical tool and a cultural transmission mechanism, reinforcing people-to-people connectivity and enhancing graduates' integration into Japanese-affiliated professional networks.

Generally, the formation of VJU illustrates how policy commitments, resource allocation, and institutional design converge to produce a joint-university model that embodies educational cooperation. This process provides empirical support for interpreting education as a structured and operational “pillar” of Vietnam-Japan relations, rather than a purely symbolic or descriptive domain.

5. Vietnam-Japan collaboration in the governance and operation of VJU

VJU was established in 2014 by Decree No. 1186/QĐ-TTg, dated July 21, 2014, of the Vietnamese Prime Minister, becoming the seventh member university of the VNU-Hanoi [25]. In 2016, VJU welcomed the first master’s course students. Although the university has been operational for about a decade, its development trajectory provides an empirically grounded basis for evaluating how bilateral educational cooperation is translated into institutional governance and performance outcomes. VJU has already achieved notable results, gradually aligning its operations with the goals and missions articulated at the time of its establishment.

In this study, institutional success is assessed using four analytical criteria: (1) the density and sustainability of partnership networks with universities and industry; (2) staff recruitment, graduate placement, and mobility outcomes; (3) international and joint accreditation outcomes; and (4) research productivity normalised within the VNU system.

VJU follows a step-by-step process aimed at establishing Vietnam as a hub for higher education in Asia. From an internationalisation perspective, the composition of the student body serves as a key indicator of cross-border academic attractiveness. The master’s programs offered by VJU attract students from various countries, including Japan, Mekong River nations, Nigeria, Russia, and other African countries [26].

Since its establishment, VJU has expanded through a phased development strategy. Beginning with six master’s programmes in 2016, the university gradually diversified its academic portfolio by introducing additional master’s programmes, undergraduate programmes in 2020, and its first doctoral programme in 2023 [26, 27]. This phased expansion illustrates how institutional development was aligned with capacity accumulation and bilateral resource availability rather than immediate comprehensiveness.

The cooperation between Vietnam and Japan has continued to strengthen, especially during the operation of the VJU in recent years. On February 18, 2020, VJU and JICA signed an MoU to implement the Technical Cooperation Project aimed at enhancing training, research, and university management capacity at VJU (referred to

as TC2). This second phase of the cooperation project focuses on improving these capacities and was underway from March 2020 to March 2025. The goal is to train high-quality human resources at all three levels: undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral. Throughout the implementation of this project, Japan continued to provide support in terms of resources, techniques, and technology transfer. This assistance helps VJU develop into an international-class research institution and gradually achieve autonomy and sustainability [28].

Strong cooperative relations between Vietnam and Japan have flourished during the operation of VJU over the past decade, benefiting both the training and post-graduate phases. Committed to educating a generation that meets the high demands of the labour market and is capable of competing internationally, VJU works closely with businesses and entrepreneurs both domestically and globally. This collaboration creates an engaging learning environment that prioritises practical experience for students. In recent years, numerous memorandums of understanding have been signed between VJU and various enterprise partners in Vietnam, Japan, and other countries. These partnerships serve as a practical indicator of social connection and labour-market relevance, linking educational outcomes to economic and professional networks.

VJU signed an MoU with National Centre for Technological Progress (NACENTECH) on March 25, 2019, specifying the cooperation in science and technology research, cooperation in science and technology application, consultancy, production and business activities, and cooperation in training [29]. On April 8, 2021, another MoU was signed between VJU and Mitani Co., Ltd., as well as Koganeu Seiki Company. This agreement established these two companies as major strategic partners of the University, particularly in the area of training activities. Some modules are delivered by these enterprises, including “Japanese and Vietnamese Business”, “Japanese Management”, and “Japanese-style Manufacturing”. These courses are specifically designed for students in the Business Study Japan (BSJ) program, not only providing students with valuable opportunities to gain practical knowledge from a business perspective, but also including field visits that offer insights into real working environments within these companies [30]. These arrangements institutionalise industry participation in curriculum delivery, reinforcing the applied-science orientation of VJU’s educational model.

An MoU between VJU and ONE Values (a top M&A consulting firm in Japan) was signed on March 20, 2025. This event is seen as a significant step in enhancing collaboration between academia and industry, which

will help develop high-quality human resources and strengthen the connection between educational practices and business operations. The MoU will serve as a basis for future initiatives such as exchange programs, internships, research projects, and partnerships between students and businesses [31].

On the same date, another MoU was signed between VJU and Daiwa Living Vietnam, one of Japan's leading real estate and construction corporations. Under the MoU, Daiwa Living Vietnam commits to supporting VJU students through internship opportunities, career support, academic seminars, and exclusive service discounts at D-WORK PLACE. The MoU also creates a foundation for the two parties to cooperate in scientific research projects, technology applications, and consultancy services [32].

Besides the international cooperation, which mainly focuses on Japanese partners, in recent years, VJU has promoted its cooperation with many higher education institutions in Vietnam, such as an MoU signed with Nguyen Tat Thanh University on February 6, 2018 [33], and an MoU signed with the Institute of Transport Science and Technology [34]. On July 13, 2023, a signing ceremony of the memorandum of understanding between VJU and Ha Long University took place at campus 1, Ha Long University, Uong Bi City, Quang Ninh province [35]. These domestic partnerships complement international cooperation by reinforcing VJU's integration into Vietnam's higher education system.

The graduation of the first cohort at VJU provides an initial indication of the outcomes associated with Vietnam-Japan collaboration in higher education. In July 2018, 56 students completed their master's degree program. Among them, 11 chose to pursue doctoral programs at VJU, with six receiving scholarships from the Japanese government. Additionally, 30 graduates accepted positions in various businesses and organisations. These included 12 students who relocated to Tokyo to work for companies such as Yoshinoya, Juntos, ALPS Electric, Hirose, and Sojitz, as well as Japanese firms operating in Vietnam like Nippon Express, DENSO, MSIG Insurance, and DHL, etc [26]. These outcomes provide concrete evidence of graduate mobility and labour-market integration, linking educational cooperation to human resource circulation.

The composition of VJU's teaching staff, particularly the proportion of Japanese professors, may be interpreted as an indicator of the degree of Vietnam-Japan collaboration in the university's operation. According to publicly available data for 2024, the distribution of teaching staff across sectors is as follows:

Table 2. Teaching staff of Vietnam Japan University in the 2023-2024 academic year.

Sector	Vietnamese	Japanese
Sector III (Business, Management, Laws)	1	12
Sector V (Statistics, Computer and Information Technology, Engineering Technology, Production and Processing Engineering, Architecture and Construction, Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, Veterinary Medicine)	25	12
Sector VII (Humanities, Social and behavioural sciences, Journalism and information, Social services, Tourism, hotels, sports and personal services, Transport services, Environment and environmental protection, Security, National Defence)	5	18
Other sectors	5	4
Total	36 (accounting for 44% of the total)	46 (accounting for 56% of the total)

Source: Statistics were derived from Vietnam Japan University [36].

The strong presence of Japanese faculty, particularly in sectors such as management, policy, and environmental studies, embeds Japanese academic standards and pedagogical norms into the institution, reinforcing VJU's identity as a hybrid, binational university. Meanwhile, the substantial proportion of Vietnamese faculty ensures curricular relevance to national development priorities and supports institutional continuity. This mixed composition also shapes the curriculum: Japanese faculty contribute theoretical rigor and international orientation, whereas Vietnamese faculty localise content and integrate practical needs of Vietnam's socio-economic context. Together, the staffing structure materially reflects and operationalises VJU's dual mission as both an international and a nationally responsive institution.

The governance model at VJU also reflects a balanced integration of Japanese and Vietnamese administrative practices. It operates under a tripartite structure consisting of the University Council, Executive Board, and Supervisory Board, ensuring strategic oversight, operational efficiency, and accountability. In terms of finance, with support from diverse funding sources and internal revenue generation, the university has developed a financial sustainability plan for its operations. This governance configuration reflects an institutionalised balance between international partnership and national regulatory frameworks.

VJU has developed an internal quality assurance system aligned with VNU and the ASEAN University Network-Quality Assurance (AUN-QA) standards. The university employs the PDCA (Plan-Do-Check-Act) cycle to monitor and improve educational programmes, research activities, and institutional performance [37].

Strong industry participation in curriculum delivery and internships further strengthens the university's applied orientation and responsiveness to labour-market demands.

Another strength of VJU is its commitment to faculty development. Faculty members are encouraged to engage in research, collaborate with international partners, and participate in workshops focused on teaching innovation. VJU provides funding and support for faculty involved in joint projects with Japanese universities and industry partners. Additionally, the publication-to-faculty ratio at VJU ranks among the highest in VNU, highlighting the university's robust research culture. As of the 2024-2025 school year, in addition to domestic publications and topics, the school has 291 international publications in the ISI/Scopus list, 13 books and monograph chapters published in foreign languages, and 29 topics implemented in the project system sponsored by JICA [38]. This represents a notable achievement within the total of 1,892 international publications produced by VNU as of December 2024 [39].

The quality of training and the reputation of the university were evaluated both internally and externally. According to the Accreditation Report dated May 27, 2025, VJU meets the International Joint Accreditation Standards approved by the International Joint Accreditation Committee. Table 3 below shows the achievement of the six baseline standards.

Table 3. The achievement results of each standard².

Standard	Performance	Standard	Performance
Standard 1: Mission, Goals & Strategy	3	Standard 4: Faculty	3
Standard 2: Internal Quality Assurance	3	Standard 5: Social Connection	4
Standard 3: Teaching & Learning	3	Standard 6: Governance	3

Source: International Joint Accreditation [37].

Accreditation results indicate that VJU demonstrates its greatest strength in Standard 5 (Social Connection), as evidenced by extensive partnerships with Japanese universities, local governments, and industry, supported by JICA and other long-term initiatives. In contrast, Standards 1, 2, 3, 4, and 6 remain at a good level, primarily due to challenges inherent in operating as a bi-national institution. These challenges also hinder VJU in fulfilling its binational mission.

From a comparative perspective, VJU shares several institutional characteristics with other transnational or joint universities established in Asia during the same period,

such as the Vietnam - German University (VGU) and selected Sino-foreign joint universities. Similar to these institutions, VJU combines foreign academic participation with domestic regulatory frameworks and public funding. However, unlike many joint universities that operate primarily as offshore extensions or discipline-specific institutions, VJU is embedded within a comprehensive national university system (VNU) and pursues a multi-disciplinary mission closely aligned with bilateral diplomatic commitments. This positioning underscores the distinctive role of VJU as an institution simultaneously serving higher education internationalisation and state-level partnership objectives.

Despite these documented achievements, the operational experience of VJU also reveals a set of structural and institutional constraints that complicate the long-term sustainability of the joint-university model. *First*, although the dual governance structure has enabled close cooperation between Vietnam and Japan, it also requires continuous coordination among VNU, Vietnamese government agencies, Japanese partner universities, and JICA. The coexistence of multiple decision-making bodies and stakeholders may slow institutional responsiveness, particularly in academic planning, financial management, and administrative procedures.

Second, VJU's development has depended heavily on Japanese ODA and long-term technical cooperation. The university's infrastructure, institutional capacity-building, and the second phase of the JICA Technical Cooperation Project (2020-2025) have all relied substantially on Japanese financial and technical support. While this cooperation has been instrumental to VJU's success, it also raises questions regarding financial sustainability once large-scale external assistance is reduced and the university is expected to increase its financial autonomy.

Third, although VJU has built an international academic environment, the composition of its faculty reflects an ongoing reliance on Japanese human resources. In the 2023-2024 academic year, Japanese academics accounted for 56% of the teaching staff, compared with 44% Vietnamese faculty. This staffing structure has been essential for maintaining Japanese academic standards and delivering bilingual programmes, but it also highlights the continuing challenge of developing a sufficiently large cohort of internationally competitive Vietnamese faculty capable of sustaining the model over the long term.

Finally, VJU operates within a competitive higher education environment in Vietnam, where public universities, foreign-invested institutions, and other international joint universities compete for talented students, faculty members, research funding, and industry

²The performance levels are: 5 - Excellent, 4 - Very Good, 3 - Good, 2 - Requiring Improvement, and 1 - Insufficient.

partnerships. Maintaining its distinctive identity therefore requires continuous innovation beyond its initial diplomatic and institutional advantages.

Collectively, these challenges do not diminish the achievements of VJU; rather, they illustrate the inherent tensions faced by binational universities operating across different governance, financial, and academic systems. The VJU experience therefore suggests that the long-term success of joint universities depends not only on strong bilateral commitment but also on sustained institutional adaptation, diversified funding sources, and the gradual localisation of academic and managerial capacity.

6. Conclusions

In the twentieth century and the early decades of the twenty-first century, we have witnessed many pivotal moments in the relationship between Vietnam and Japan. Despite various historical events, the most significant aspect of their connection has been a shared desire to cooperate and build relationships. This commitment has led to the establishment of a "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity in Asia and the World" in 2023. This partnership serves as a solid foundation for enhancing cooperation between Vietnam and Japan, particularly in the field of education, exemplified by the establishment of VJU in 2014.

The establishment and operation of VJU illustrate the strong cooperation between Vietnam and Japan. Japan's role is prominently evident in both the human and financial resources dedicated to preparing for VJU's establishment. This support continues during VJU's operation. This collaboration has contributed to VJU's progress toward meeting international academic standards and has supported its positioning within the regional higher education landscape.

Over the past decade, VJU has consistently pursued the objectives and mission established at its inception. The university has achieved significant progress in administration, educational programs, pedagogical approaches, and research outcomes. As a result, VJU has not only met the accreditation standards of the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training but has also attained international accreditation. However, VJU continues to face structural challenges, including long-term financial sustainability, recruitment of permanent faculty, and the complexities of a bi-national governance model. Addressing these issues is essential for the university's continued development. In spite of that, the achievements the VJU obtained reflect the sustained efforts of VJU members, effective collaboration between Vietnamese and Japanese faculty, and supportive policies from both governments, which together create an environment conducive to

teaching, training, and research. VJU can be understood as an institutional expression of the strategic partnership in culture and education between Vietnam and Japan.

Beyond its mission in education and research, VJU has become a hub for promoting art, culture, sports, and information exchange between Vietnam and Japan. Assessed against clearly defined institutional and performance indicators, VJU demonstrates how educational cooperation can function as an operational and symbolic pillar of Vietnam-Japan relations. While not without structural constraints, the VJU case provides systematic evidence that joint universities can translate diplomatic intent into durable institutional outcomes, thereby offering a replicable - though context-dependent - model of education diplomacy in Asia.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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