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MEKONG-AUSTRALIA PARTNERSHIP SUPPORT UNIT

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01 BACKGROUND

The Mekong-Australia Partnership (MAP) Phase II is a AUD222.5 million investment from the Australian Government over five years, (1 July 2024 to 30 June 2029) to progress the goal of a more resilient and inclusive Mekong subregion that pursues joint solutions to shared and transboundary challenges. MAP Phase II will contribute to building Australia's reputation as a trusted and reliable partner in supporting a resilient, inclusive and sustainable Mekong subregion through a focus on five thematic areas: climate resilience, water security, economic resilience and integration, gender equality, disability and social inclusion (GEDSI), and preventing and countering transnational crime.

The MAP Leadership and Skills program is a strategic, cross-cutting investment designed to deepen Australia's economic and security ties with the Mekong subregion (including Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam) by facilitating access to Australian education and professional learning, and promotion of knowledge sharing and subregional cooperation. The Leadership and Skills program contributes to the broader MAP outcomes by supporting diverse leaders within the Mekong subregion to apply their skills and capabilities to contribute to development across MAP thematic areas.

With strategic direction from the Mekong Hub and Leadership and Skills Thematic Working Group, the program is implemented by the MAP Support Unit (MAP-SU) and delivers Australia Awards MAP (AA-MAP) scholarships, masterclasses, scholar and alumni engagement activities, including alumni grants.

The primary activity for supporting the engagement, networking and development of AA-MAP scholars on-award is the Mekong Leaders Network (MLN). The enrichment program described in this Concept Note will be offered to AA-MAP scholars through a series of linked activities designed to connect scholars early and provide professional development and networking opportunities throughout their study programs.

The MLN will support AA-MAP scholars to:

- build enduring connections across AA-MAP and other scholarship cohorts,
- deepen their understanding of Mekong shared challenges and subregional cooperation, and
- broaden their potential leadership impact as alumni.

The program will complement activities provided by Australian academic institutions, will ensure scholars are not overburdened and can focus on successful completion of their study programs.

The components of the MLN (see Figure 1) are outlined in this document and include;

- in-person intensive workshops – in the Mekong subregion prior to departure and in Australia – to promote professional learning and development that complements formal study programs;
- networking and engagement with DFAT, AA-MAP and Australia Awards (AA) cohorts;
- participation in professional opportunities through internships and activities that strengthen people to people and institutional linkages.

The program may be supplemented with other targeted online, in-person or hybrid activities that may support scholars to build local networks in their city or state, develop professional links with Australian people and organisations, and/or share insights and discussions within their thematic study areas.

The enrichment experience offered through MLN will be amplified by supporting scholars to connect with other Australian Government Funded activities, particularly Australia Awards, New Colombo Plan, Aus4ASEAN scholarships and enrichment opportunities offered by Global Education and Scholarships Section (GLE).

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

The MAP Leadership and Skills program has two end-of-program outcomes (EOPOs), aligned with the MAP Portfolio Logic and Australia Awards Global Framework as follows:

- EOPO 1: Diverse leaders apply their skills and capabilities to contribute to development across MAP thematic areas
- EOPO 2: Diverse leaders cooperate to develop inclusive solutions for shared and transboundary challenges in the Mekong subregion.

The MLN will contribute to the achievement of these two EOPOs and be subject to monitoring and evaluation as defined in the Leadership and Skills Program MEL Framework.

PROGRAM PARAMETERS

The MLN will be scaled to provide development opportunities across four annual AA-MAP scholarship intakes: Intakes 2026 to 2029. Each annual intake is comprised of 30 awardees:

- 10 awardees from Thailand
- 5 awardees from Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam and Cambodia.

The MLN program will be delivered flexibly to accommodate varying start dates for each Intake cohort. MAP-SU will advise the Delivery Partner of the commencement and completion timing of awardees at the conclusion of each annual selection and placement process to enable planning for MLN activities. An estimate of commencement and duration in Australia is outlined in Table 1.

Generally, most awardees will mobilise to commence in Semester 1 of their respective intake year. However, there will be some cases of Semester 2 commencement for Intake 2026 (scholars from Myanmar and Vietnam will commence at Semester 2 for Intake 2026) and there are likely to be similar cases for subsequent years. Activities in Components 1, 2 and 3 will be timed to ensure participation of all awardees in their intake cohort in the most cost-efficient means possible. For example, it is noted in section 2.0 that Component 2 activities will be delivered in the second half of the calendar year when all awardees commencing Semester 1 and Semester 2 have mobilized and commenced their study programs.

The exception to the above is for any awardees who defer commencement for 12 months. In such cases the individual will join the MLN cohort for the following intake year. For example, if an Intake 2026 awardee defers commencement to 2027, then they will join the pre-departure and in-Australia activities with the Intake 2027 cohort.

Note that a shorter program of activities is required for Intakes 2028 and 2029 due to current MAP-SU contract completion date (June 2029). Any contract extension for the MAP-SU beyond 30 June 2029 will be determined by DFAT. The Delivery Partner will be advised by MAP-SU in due course if a full program of activities for Intakes 2028 and 2029 is required. If so, this will be subject to a contract amendment.

Table 1: Estimated number of AA-MAP scholars in Australia considering likely commencement time (Semester 1, Semester 2).

		2026		2027		2028		2029
Semester/ period		S1 Jan-Jun	S2 Jul-Dec	S1 Jan-Jun	S2 Jul-Dec	S1 Jan-Jun	S2 Jul-Dec	S1 Jan-Jun
Intake 2026	<i>Commencing</i>	20	10 ¹					
	Total in Australia	20	30	30	30			
Intake 2027	<i>Commencing</i>			25	5 ²			
	Total in Australia			25	30	30	30	
Intake 2028	<i>Commencing</i>					25	5	
	Total in Australia					25	30	30
Intake 2029	<i>Commencing</i>							25
	Total in Australia							25

¹ Awardees from Myanmar (5) and Vietnam (5) will commence in Semester 2 for Intake 2026² It is expected that awardees from Myanmar (5) will commence in Semester 2 for Intakes 2027, 2028, 2029

02 PROGRAM CONCEPT

The MLN is composed of four integrated components (Figure 1), which together will offer AA-MAP scholars with well targeted and effective professional learning, and relationship and network building opportunities across a two-year period of overall engagement. The MLN experience will also support scholars to help them transition at completion of their study programs and establish linkages with the MAP regional and their own country alumni programs and activities.

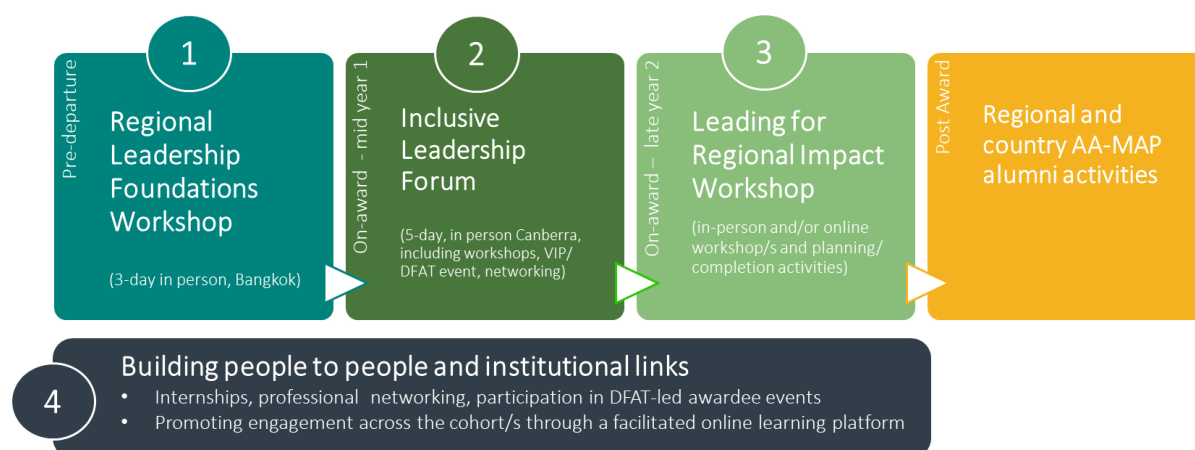


Figure 1: Core components of the Mekong Leaders Network showing connection to

COMPONENT 1: LEADERSHIP FOUNDATIONS WORKSHOP

Who	All 30 AA-MAP awardees
When	November/ Early December prior to commencement
Where	Bangkok Note that for Intake 2026, this will be held in Hanoi.

The Leadership Foundations' workshop is a two- to-three-day event held in person in the Mekong subregion (likely Bangkok) prior to commencing study. All awardees will attend the event regardless of their planned commencement (Semester 1 or 2). This first convening of the cohort is foundational in linking the awardees with each other, building relationships and networks, and commencing a program of learning as regional leaders.

The workshop will focus on foundational leadership skills, creating networks, and building a deeper understanding of regional cooperation. Importantly this event will be designed to complement country-level pre-departure activities. Being held in Bangkok, the event will also offer opportunities for engagement of scholars with Australian Embassy staff, including the Mekong Hub. This will be a particularly valuable opportunity for scholars to meet DFAT officers who are leading implementation across MAP thematic areas, and to learn about MAP strategic intent, objectives and outcomes.

COMPONENT 2: INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP FORUM

Who	All 30 AA-MAP awardees for the intake
When	Mid-to-late year in the first year of study to enable Semester 1 and 2 awardees to fully participate
Where	Canberra, Australia

The Inclusive Leadership Forum is a five-day in-person event held in Canberra during the most common second semester for the intake cohort. The event will offer in-depth learning about inclusive and developmental leadership and contributing to regional cooperation. It will also provide an opportunity to connect with DFAT and other high-profile stakeholders and with representatives from respective embassies.

Scholars who are commencing Semester 2 may require earlier mobilization dates to enable participation.

The workshop will be residential, offering an immersive learning event, and a two-way exchange where the facilitators and guest speakers promote discussion and sharing of ideas, and where AA-MAP scholars are encouraged to think critically about their own developmental leadership style, approach and aspirations. It will also focus on strengthening knowledge and engagement with complex shared and transboundary issues in the Mekong subregion.

Gender equality and social inclusion will thread strongly through all activities, with scholars learning practical approaches for inclusive leadership and change management.

The event will offer opportunities for high profile public diplomacy and will include professional photography/videography such as during networking events and field trips. Delivery Partners will be advised of any restrictions to photography, videography or social media that apply to any scholars.

The event will be highly participatory, interactive and designed to fully engage scholars in a range of thought-provoking, skills development and practical application activities, including:

- Seminars by guest speakers.
- Field trips, including to Parliament House and other locations.
- Networking and meeting with Australian government officials, representative from respective Embassies, organisation and business leaders.
- Workshop sessions enabling intensive learning, including use of scenarios and practical application activities to support application of skills and knowledge.
- Group work and collaborative activities exploring key topic areas.
- Individual reflective and planning activities, including engagement with mentors.

COMPONENT 3: LEADING FOR REGIONAL IMPACT WORKSHOP

Who	All 30 AA-MAP awardees for the intake including any who may have completed under a shorter-term study program
When	Most common last semester of study program prior to return
Where	In an Australian city and/or online

As the final formal event within the MLN, and considering factors such as available budget, location of scholars, time of completion of scholars based on time of commencement and length of study period (e.g. 18 months versus two years), the Leading for Regional Impact workshop will be configured as either:

- I. A two- to three-day event held in an Australian city
- II. A series of online events
- III. A hybrid of in-person and online including in-person events held in the closest city for subsets of the cohorts

The Delivery Partner will propose a configuration that considers the factors noted above and reflects best value for money in the achievement of learning outcomes.

The workshop will include completion and planning activities where awardees reflect and share their learnings with each other, including thematic insights and prepare for challenges and opportunities to enhance regional cooperation upon return home. During planning for this event, consideration will be given to involvement of AA-MAP awardees from other cohorts and Australia Awards scholars, such as those who are studying fields aligned to the MAP thematic areas. Any proposals for other cohort involvement will be submitted by the Delivery Partner to MAP-SU who will seek DFAT approval.

COMPONENT 4: PEOPLE TO PEOPLE AND INSTITUTIONAL LINKS

Who	All 30 AA-MAP awardees. Also potential to engage with MAP Phase 1 and AA-MAP alumni (such as Myanmar AA-MAP graduates who remain in Australia), AA scholars, Aus4ASEAN scholars etc.
When	From pre-departure through to the full on-award period
Where	Various

BUILDING LINKAGES AND PROFESSIONAL PROFILE

Through the MLN, scholars will be offered opportunities to develop stronger networks, gain relevant professional experience and participate, and contribute to, professional forums. Balancing the importance of not over burdening scholars, activities will be opt in and well targeted, and identified through consultation with the scholars and DFAT (Mekong Hub and Mekong posts).

Delivery partners will include consideration of the following opportunities in their proposals and outline how their approach to MLN delivery will enable scholars to access opportunities of this kind during their time in Australia. This will include budget estimates or proposed means of funding scholar participation.

- Internships, including paid and volunteer placements.
- Business and professional associations and networking events.
- Professional conferences, where scholars will be encouraged to contribute as well as attend.
- Twinning opportunities in relevant government, NGO or private sector organisations.
- Connecting scholars to business and organisational networks with strong ties to the Mekong subregion.
- Community based and other activities of significance to Australian culture and history.

ONLINE LEARNING AND NETWORKING PLATFORM

Engagement and interaction across the MLN will be supported by an online platform that will be established, managed, and moderated by the Delivery Partner. The platform will provide an online space where awardees can communicate and share information and ideas with each other, and access information about MLN activities

and opportunities. The platform will be configured to be inclusive, supporting a blended learning approach and must be accessible for awardees with disabilities. It will provide a safe and secure place for awardees to openly share experiences and talk about issues they may not usually feel free to express. Security and moderation are key concerns so that awardees can engage in safety.

The online platform will be introduced to awardees before or during the Regional Leadership Foundations Workshop and become a key point of engagement throughout the program. Awardees will be invited to co-design key aspects of the platform to influence the information and resources, and the modes and frequency of engagement. The platform will be adaptive and responsive to the interests and needs of awardees across their study program.

The Platform will support awardees to participate in discussions and activities that focus on technical, professional, regional and transboundary issues with a strong emphasis on the five MAP thematic areas. The aim is to create small 'communities of practice' for awardees to connect and engage on issues of relevant to their country and the Mekong region, and foster innovation and relationships that endure beyond completion of study programs.

The platform must also access and use relevant web metrics to monitor interactions and drive improvements to the platform to ensure effectiveness over time.

OTHER DFAT-LED SCHOLAR ACTIVITIES

Supported by the MAP-SU team, the Delivery Partner will maintain awareness of on-award activities organised or sponsored by DFAT and ensure that AA-MAP scholars are encouraged to participate. The GLE team promote and deliver on-award activities (through Global Support Unit of the Australia Awards Global Support Mechanism), and these offer opportunities for scholars to connect with others across the range of Australian Government scholarship investments including AA and Aus4ASEAN.

Uptake and participation will be monitored and reported by the Delivery Partner. Where necessary, and on advice from the MAP-SU and approval by DFAT, consideration will be given to provision of supports – such as per diem or travel allowance – if needed to enable AA-MAP scholars to participate.

ADDITIONAL REQUIREMENT: THAILAND PRE-DEPARTURE TRAINING

In addition to the substantive MLN program, the Delivery Partner will also be required to deliver a Pre-Departure Training Program for 10 Thai awardees annually across Intakes 2026 to 2029. The aim of this activity is to ensure that Thai awardees are academically and socially prepared, and ready to mobilise to effectively commence their studies in Australia. The activity will also contribute to the achievement of the Leadership and Skills program EOPOs. A set of specific learning outcomes will be agreed with the contracted Delivery Partner and will at a minimum include those outlined in Table 2.

Table 2: Proposed learning outcomes for the Thailand AA-MAP Pre-departure Training

Academic Preparedness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a solid understanding of the Australian higher education system, including the confidence to engage with a variety of academic and support services. • Develop a solid understanding of academic culture and requirements of Australian universities. • Understand and develop fundamental academic skills required to succeed at postgraduate study level, and be successful on-award, including self-directed independent learning and critical thinking skills.
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a plan to address those study skills, including academic writing and research skill, that will need to be the focus of improvement in the first six months of their studies. • Develop a solid understanding of Australian digital learning environment, and enhance information technology skills that enables access to information and learning resources, and to use the technology available at awardees' chosen university for study and research.
Social Preparedness and Inclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop an understanding of the Australian lifestyle and a preparedness for embracing life in an Australian academic environment and beyond. • Gain an awareness of inter-cultural issues and develop cross cultural communication skills. • Gain an understanding of approaches to managing stresses that can emerge in a new living and studying environment, and the supports in place to maintain and address any mental health concerns. • Develop practical knowledge and skills for managing Contribution to Living Expenses (CLE), budgets and payments while living in Australia. • Develop skills (including effective networking skills) to make the most of their time in Australia by participating in non-academic activities, immersing themselves in Australian communities and organisations, and making connections with the Australian people, including an ability to develop personal and professional networks and to overcome personal challenges. • Develop an understanding of Australian societal norms and values and Australian laws and policies on sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment, gender-based violence and child protection. • Be introduced to Indigenous Australian culture, and socialise the concepts of Welcome to Country, Reconciliation and related cultural sensitivities.
Scholarship Preparedness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a strong understanding of the responsibilities, entitlements (including overseas health cover (OSHC)) and processes that apply to their Scholarship as outlined in the Scholarship Policy Handbook. • Promote a greater awareness of development issues, both nationally and internationally. • Understand the connection between studies in Australia and the Thailand and Mekong subregional development context. • Support awardees to understand and navigate processes in Australia (in locations relevant to their university) to secure suitable rental accommodation.

It is expected that Academic Preparedness and Social Preparedness will be the predominant focus of the Pre-Departure Training program. Delivery Partners will be required to include engagement with a local Thai provider.

The delivery is aimed to commence after the regional MLN Component 1 and be face-to-face for one week in Bangkok, followed by a further 2 weeks delivered online in collaboration with a local Thai-based provider.

Delivery Partners will be required to include engagement with alumni (and scholars where relevant), and support awardees to establish connections with Student Contact Officers at their respective Australian universities as a key requirement for effective preparation for arrival.

MAPSU will support awardees to progress the practical aspects of mobilisation and arrival including visas, medical checks, flights and initial accommodation. Delivery Partner proposals do not need to address this issue.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR DELIVERY PARTNER

Partners will be encouraged to offer innovations and ideas to maximise the benefits delivered through the configuration of activities and modalities. Offers must represent best overall value for money, consistent with DFAT's value for money principles³, in achieving the required learning outcomes.

MONITORING, EVALUATION AND LEARNING

This activity will be monitored and evaluated based on the specifications and indicators in the Leadership and Skills Monitoring and Evaluation Framework (MELF). Partners will be required to collect and deliver data and reports in accordance with MELF specifications and timelines.

Delivery partners will apply critical reflective and learning processes to their delivery approach throughout the program to inform and iterate improvements over time, and to manage risks and opportunities.

Data and reports provided will be quality assured by the MAP-SU MEL Adviser and the Team Leader, Leadership and Skills to ensure data meets all Mekong Hub and DFAT standards and reporting requirements. In addition, provider/s will be actively engaged in Leadership and Skills program planning and reflection activities to ensure a learning and continuous improvement approach is applied to the delivery of the MLN over time.

COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL MEDIA

The MAP-SU team will obtain DFAT clearances and confirm specifications and requirements related to all communications and media across the MLN. The Delivery Partner will be required to produce high quality media including photographs and social media products based on these specifications. The Leadership and Skills team will manage all DFAT clearance requirements and ensure the Delivery Partner is aware of any restrictions to photography, videography and media.

03 ACTIVITY MANAGEMENT

The MLN is managed by the Leadership and Skills team within the MAPSU, under the direction of the Mekong Hub Leadership and Skills program management team. Procurement, contracting, contract management, review and performance will be managed by the MAPSU.

Guidance will be provided by the Leadership and Skills Thematic Working Group, which is convened by Mekong Hub and provides opportunity for DFAT Mekong Posts' engagement.

The Leadership and Skills Contractor Coordination Group, convened by the MAP-SU provides for operational coordination of MLN activities across regional programs. This will be essential for coordination and planning for pre-departure and arrival activities to avoid conflicting with existing country-level plans and activities.

DELIVERY PARTNER REQUIREMENTS

The activities under this concept note will be delivered by a single Delivery Partner who will be contracted by MAP-SU and responsible for overall design, delivery and evaluation of all MLN components.

³ <https://www.dfat.gov.au/aid/who-we-work-with/value-for-money-principles/Pages/value-for-money-principles>

The Primary Delivery Partner will have demonstrated capacity and expertise:

- Delivering all activities to a high quality and standard, consistent with the Australia Awards Global Strategic Framework: Investing in the next generation of global leaders for development 2021-2024, Australia Awards Linkages Framework, and the Leadership and Skills Program Investment Design Document.
- Working with and supporting the professional learning and development of diverse Australia Awards scholars and/or alumni, including an understanding of the challenges experienced by international scholars living and studying in Australia.
- Delivering leadership development that is practical and relevant to the Mekong subregion based on an understanding of development challenges and priorities and the social, cultural and economic context.
- Engaging in formative co-design of key activities with MAP SU as Activity Manager.
- Is resourced to manage and deliver a comprehensive and integrated program of learning with expertise to design, deliver, evaluate, and report on all program components.

ADDITIONAL DELIVERY PARTNERS, SUBJECT MATTER EXPERTS

Where required, additional Delivery Partners and/or subject matter experts will be engaged by the Primary Delivery Partner or the Activity Manager, to ensure access to expertise in key areas such as:

- Australian Indigenous culture, history and practice.
- Subject matter experts in development issues relevant to the Mekong subregion, such as water resource management, climate change, economic development, population and Sustainable Development Goals etc.
- Other disciplines or topic areas as required.

LEARNING APPROACH

The Delivery Partner will ensure that the content and focus of learning is consistent with an understanding of transformational leadership, including the concepts defined by the Developmental Leadership Program (DLP)⁴. The DLP takes the view that leadership in developing contexts needs to step beyond a focus on individual qualities and social influence. Developmental Leadership aims to progress important economic and policy agendas, and address entrenched and persistent problems (e.g. poverty, family violence, impact of globalisation) in conditions of political sensitivity and where political will is a key driver of change. This requires political awareness, systems thinking and ability to navigate complexity through inclusive and collaborative processes. Motivated individuals play a key role by coming together to influence and legitimise alternative ideas and create political will that achieves transformational change.

The MLN will aim to strengthen developmental leadership capacity in each cohort through a program of activities over a period of 2 years. The development will be foundational in nature, meeting individuals where they are in their leadership journey and experience, and offering practical approaches and support to build strong and resilient identities as leaders, together with practical skills, knowledge and confidence as qualified alumni.

The Delivery Partner will also ensure that activities and workshops are grounded in a **critical, gendered and inclusive perspectives of leadership**. The choice of topics and the means of engagement must make it possible to

⁴ The Developmental Leadership Program (DLP) are “...an international research initiative that explores how leadership, power and political processes drive or block successful development.” Their independent research program is supported by the Australian Government, and delivered in partnership with University of Birmingham (UK) and La Trobe University, Melbourne - www.dlprog.org

deeply explore the dynamics of gender and social inclusion, inequality, disability equity and rights, and all forms of discrimination, and how these manifests in social and organisational life. This also means positioning leadership as holding primary responsibility for initiating and championing culture, practice and behaviour change to address inequality and improve inclusion across and through the organisational, social and community systems.

The activities will aim to create awareness and open opportunity for participants to engage constructively and effectively in gender equality and inclusion issues related to their own country and culture, and offer analytical tools and practical strategies that they can apply to create and lead more inclusive and equitable organisations and workplaces. Activities will also include exposure to relevant organisations, associations and institutions to enable awardees to extend their professional networks and people to people links in Australia and with other international scholars.

The program will as much as possible, include a balance of modalities offering intellectual, interpersonal, experiential, and applied learning and ensuring that relevant ‘real-world’ issues (including case studies) are at the centre of the development.

KEY LEARNING OUTCOMES

The learning outcomes will be confirmed with the Delivery Partner but will include:

- Understanding leadership in complex and dynamic (and diverse) environments, including application of Developmental Leadership concepts and use of political economy and other analytical tools to inform strategy;
- Exploring the development imperatives and emerging priorities, economic, geo-political and transboundary issues relevant to the Mekong subregion and each participating country and implications for development across the region;
- Understanding the ‘business case’ and evidence-base for gender equality and social inclusion in the economic, social and cultural context of the Mekong subregion;
- Learning and applying Developmental Leadership skills through direct action, advocacy and collaboration;
- Learning and applying practical strategies to advance an inclusive development agenda;
- Learning and applying practical strategies to create innovative, adaptive and agile organisations and institutions.
- Developing practical skills to identify and resolve complex and persistent problems at organisational, sectoral, national and international levels across the region.
- Developing practical skills to analyse and engage stakeholders, staff and/or community in development and policy planning, implementation, and evaluation.
- Strengthening skills in critical reflection, collaborative inquiry and process management.
- Planning for life long professional learning and development.

04 BUDGET

The budget allocation for the MLN draws on the actual cost of a similar program delivered in MAP Phase 1 and is scaled based on the delivery of activities across approximately two calendar years for each cohort distributed over three financial years. The budget includes partial costings for Intake 2028 and 2029 cohorts to cover anticipated costs up to 30 June 2029. As noted in section 01, the Delivery Partner will be advised if support for these latter intakes will extend beyond June 2029, with a subsequent contract amendment and budget confirmed at that time.

The budget in Table 3 represents annual upper limits that proposals will need to consider. The 2025/26 budget is also front loaded to account for design and initial set up costs.

Table 3: Budget allocation across the financial years to 30 June 2029 (includes a 3% annual escalator)

Financial Year	2025/26	2026/27	2027/28	2028/29
Budget upper limit (AUD)	\$223,350.00	\$345,160.00	\$474,019.00	\$376,592.00