



Asia  
Education  
Foundation



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
MELBOURNE

# WHAT WORKS

REPORT

# SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS IN A DIGITAL AGE





**Australian Government**



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Research has shown that international school partnerships have substantial benefits in developing teachers and students' global competence, intercultural understanding, and international mindsets. In a rapidly globalising world, these skills are of vital importance to the next generation (AEF 2016, Monash University 2018).

## Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Despite the well-documented evidence on the benefits of international school partnerships, the COVID-19 pandemic saw many school partnership programs languish or cease altogether. This is largely because school partnerships have traditionally focused on, and been sustained by, international travel and face-to-face engagement.

With every challenge, however, an opportunity emerges. School closures and travel bans enforced by the pandemic resulted in a rapid pivot to online learning. Schools, teachers, and students around the world have since become highly skilled in the use of digital technologies and digital devices for learning are widely available. For school partnerships, this digital pivot represents a huge opportunity to bring people together and creating meaningful and lifelong connections in a virtual space.

Despite the rapid take up of online learning and the opportunities it has presented for internationalisation, there has, however, been little evidence of the success of digital school partnerships. In this report we address that gap, both synthesising evidence of impactful digital school partnerships, and highlighting best practice approaches. We utilise the example of the Asia Education Foundation (AEF)'s Australia-China Digital BRIDGE Program and have designed this report to provide a source of reference for future initiatives.

## Towards Digital BRIDGE Programs

AEF has run BRIDGE programs for many years, and in 23 countries. BRIDGE is the acronym for Building Relationships through Intercultural Dialogue and Growing Engagement. The goal of BRIDGE Programs has always been to provide schools with a unique opportunity to equip their students to be ready for an increasingly global world.

BRIDGE focuses on developing students to be global citizens who have:

- deeper intercultural understanding
- real-life digital capability
- new knowledge of Asia and Australia, and
- strengthened language skills.

Building on the lessons learned from the digital pivot of the BRIDGE program during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Australia-China Digital BRIDGE Program was the first school partnership program designed to be delivered in a fully online format. Pivoting from a face-to-face mode was a risk, as the question remained: would similar benefits accrue if participants were unable to meet in person? As this report shows, the digital iteration of BRIDGE has generated profoundly positive impacts for teachers and students, despite the absence of face-to-face activities.

## Generating valuable outcomes

The Program has provided rich opportunities for cultural exchange, enhanced collaboration, and teacher professional development.

Through virtual exchange, teachers and students have engaged in meaningful interactions, developed empathy towards different cultures, and cultivated intercultural understanding. These valuable outcomes ensure that students and teachers are better prepared for the increasing intensity of cross-border engagement, and to engage with their peers from different backgrounds in mutually beneficial ways.

## Leveraging digital platforms

To achieve these important benefits, the Program has leveraged the digital affordance offered by digital platforms such as WeChat, Zoom and Milanote. These have offered a readily available and feature-rich space for communication, collaboration, and sharing of resources. The targeted use of suitable digital platforms has ensured that teachers have been able to derive optimal benefits, fostering cross-cultural connections and facilitating intercultural learning experiences for their students.

## Digital literacy of teachers

An essential component of successful school partnerships in the AEF Australia-China Digital BRIDGE program has been the confidence, and competence, of teachers in utilising digital technologies in teaching and connecting students. Their comfort in a digital environment has ensured that they have been able to effectively navigate international school partnerships.

The Australia-China Digital BRIDGE Program has provided opportunities for teachers to develop proficiency in using various digital tools and platforms. They have been able to facilitate virtual collaboration, co-design projects, and engage students in intercultural learning. This has an enormous benefit for teachers in equipping them with skills that they can apply to all their teaching activities, beyond their participation in the BRIDGE Program.

Through targeted professional development programs, such as the Australia-China Digital BRIDGE Program, teachers can enhance their digital skills, integrate technology into their pedagogical practices, and leverage virtual environments to foster meaningful educational experiences. This is a vital aspect of professional learning that future proofs their teaching skills.

## Lessons for the future

By exploring the Digital BRIDGE program's successes and challenges, we hope educators can gain insights into effective strategies for implementing digital school partnerships and enhancing student outcomes in a virtual context, wherever in the world these may take place.



## SECTION ONE

# MOVING INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS TO THE DIGITAL AGE

In this first section, we explore the advantages of digital school partnerships, and highlight the positive impact they can have on student learning outcomes and engagement as well as teacher professional development. We outline the role of education policies and curriculum context in promoting and supporting digital school partnerships. We provide examples of digital school partnership programs from around the world and emphasize the importance of teacher professional development.

# INTRODUCTION: INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS

International school partnerships, also known as sister school relationships, have long been used as a tool to enrich learning, create international connections and bring global perspectives into the school classroom (AEF, 2014; Monash University, 2018).

Broadly defined as “a meaningful, reciprocal and sustainable long-term partnership between two schools, aimed at fulfilling a range of purposes” (Monash University, 2018, p. 15), international school partnerships take many forms and are designed to achieve multiple outcomes such as language learning, reciprocal exchange, social justice education, teacher capacity building (Monash University, 2018; AEF, 2014) and, more recently, the integration of Global Citizenship (British Council, 2022), Global Competence (OECD, 2018) and Intercultural Understanding (VIC DET, 2018), into the school curriculum.

Despite the differences in outcomes, central to most partnerships is the concept of reciprocity or collaborative learning (Monash University, 2018). Educational collaboration through international school partnerships has a particularly strong history in the European Union, supported by flexible travel policies and regional policies and programs such as the 35-year-old Erasmus Program.

In the United Kingdom the British government has provided substantial funding to set up school partnership programs such as the Connecting Classrooms through Global Learning, delivered by the British Council, which has led to the establishment of more than 8,000 partnerships between British Schools and schools in 30 countries globally (British Council, 2022, p. 20). The Global Schools Alliance (Global Schools Alliance, 2022), also based in the United Kingdom, provides a user pays international school partnership program, incorporating over 8,000 schools across 127 countries.

In the Australian context, opportunities engage in and take up of international school partnerships is smaller than the long running

programs in Europe and the United Kingdom. The Australia-Asia BRIDGE school partnership program, delivered by AEF and supported by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), is the largest nation-wide program that partners schools, teachers, and students with their counterparts overseas. Since 2008, the BRIDGE program has engaged 1,004 schools and established 540 partnerships between Australia and 23 nations across Asia and the Pacific.

On a smaller scale, other international school partnership programs available to Australian schools include school connections through local or state Government Sister City/Sister State relationships (DFAT, 2022), directly through state Departments of Education (QED, 2023; CCGC, 2023) or through Non-Government or Charity programs (Global School Partners, 2022).

Given the popularity of international school partnerships as a tool to internationalise education, there is a growing literature base, made up of academic and grey literature, program evaluations and partnership case studies to show the benefits provided by international school partnerships, including:

- the development of global citizenship in students and teachers (British Council, 2022),
- support, motivation and enthusiasm for language learning, and increased numbers of students participating in language learning beyond the compulsory level (DEECD, 2013),
- increased global awareness and internationalisation within the school community (Monash University, 2018),
- improved professional practice and teacher competence and confidence in the use of technology in the classroom (DEECD, 2013; AEF, 2014).

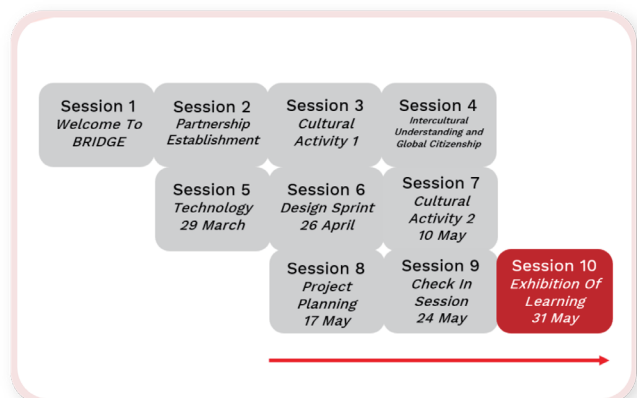
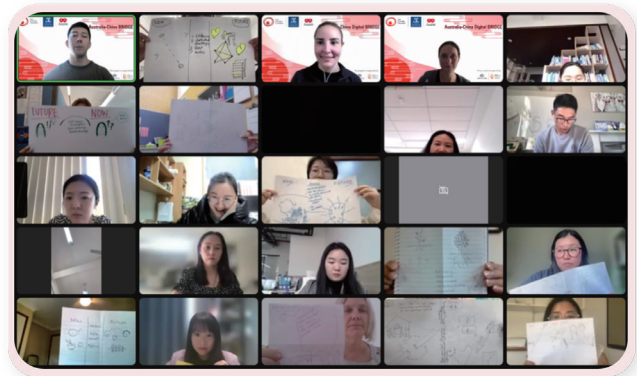
# THE BRIDGE PROGRAM

BRIDGE (Building Relationships through Intercultural Dialogue and Growing Engagement) is a school partnerships program that connects school communities, builds teacher capacity and fosters people-to-people links across schools in Australia and 23 nations in Asia and the Pacific.

Managed by the Asia Education Foundation, an initiative of Asialink at the University of Melbourne, and funded by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), the BRIDGE program aims to create sustained, collaborative partnerships between schools in Australia and Asia and the Pacific. The objectives of the BRIDGE Program are to provide access to and facilitate the exchange of new pedagogical knowledge and professional practice in participating educators and, improve intercultural understanding in participating educators, students and communities.

The program sees teachers as the key conduit to improving intercultural understanding and global competence in students. It is built around a teacher professional learning program that builds educator's cultural knowledge and awareness, intercultural understanding, ICT skills, design thinking and the capacity to connect classrooms and manage an international partnership at a whole-school level. It is this focus on the teacher which separates the BRIDGE program from many other international school partnership programs, which tend to focus on student-to-student connections (AEF, 2014).

Since it was first established in 2008, the BRIDGE program has established 540 school partnerships, between 1,004 schools, and built the capacity of over 2,400 educators.





# WHY DIGITAL SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS?

The BRIDGE school partnership program was originally designed around an international exchange and in-person professional learning and relied on face-to-face interaction to be successful (AEF, 2014).



Digital school partnerships are growing in popularity and have become a crucial component of international collaboration between schools. The rise of online learning and the increasing confidence and comfort of both students and teachers in the adoption of digital technologies has further accelerated this shift (Sullivan, et. al., 2021).

Furthermore, increasing concern for the environment and the emphasis on the reduction of carbon emissions such as the Zero for Schools initiative, means that it is likely that school partnership programs will never return to the complete reliance on travel as in traditional models. Instead, a combination of fully digital and hybrid models is the likely form for future collaboration and partnerships (Huish, 2021).

In this changing global context, the experience of the Australia-China Digital BRIDGE Program offers an opportunity to test ways to connect teachers and students in a digital space. Hence, the outcomes of this Program offer important lessons for the design and delivery of future digital school partnerships.

Not only do digital school partnerships rely on teachers and students having existing skills in utilising digital tools, but they also provide both groups with the opportunity to build on these nascent digital competencies,

improve their communication and collaboration skills, and enhance their cultural awareness. The combined benefits leverage skills and competencies in communication that will be invaluable for future local and international engagement (British Council, 2022).

A key focus of BRIDGE programs has always been on building teacher capacity and professional practice (AEF, 2014). Digital BRIDGE programs such as the one profiled here, provide both a virtual and metaphorical platform for teachers to share practice and resources, develop new skills and collaborate on ideas that can be implemented in their classrooms.

The other essential group of beneficiaries in BRIDGE programs is students. BRIDGE programs aim to provide teachers with the opportunity to gain enhanced skills to positively impact the way in which they teach students (Monash University, 2018; AEF, 2016). Beyond this, they also provide students with unique opportunities to learn about different cultures, languages, and traditions, fostering a sense of global citizenship (DEECD, 2013). This is a vital skill for future success and is essential in equipping the leaders of tomorrow with the ability to engage with their counterparts around the world.

Digital school partnerships can therefore offer a high impact, cost-effective and sustainable approach to building international collaborations. They can help schools promote cultural exchange, enhance digital competencies, and create opportunities for cross-cultural dialogue. Teachers and students can benefit from the diverse perspectives and ideas that digital school partnerships offer, making them a valuable experience for everyone involved.

# AUSTRALIAN POLICY CONTEXT

There are several important policy settings in Australia that influence the way in which school partnerships can be conducted, and the goals and outcomes that they should focus on.

## Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration

The Australian Government, alongside state and territory governments, are committed to providing equitable and high-quality education to all young Australians, as stated in the 2019 Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration.

Goal 1 of the Declaration focuses on excellence and equity in the Australian Education System. Goal 1 states that the Australian education system will “collaborate internationally to share best practice and help young Australians learn about and engage with the world” (p. 5). Clearly, participation in a BRIDGE program is an important means to achieve these outcomes.

Goal 2 of the Declaration refers to young Australians as “confident and creative individuals who understand their responsibilities as global citizens and know how to affect positive change. Goal 2 further refers to young Australians becoming active and informed members of the community who are informed and responsible global and local members of the community who value and celebrate cultural and linguistic differences, and engage in the global community, particularly with our neighbours in the Indo-Pacific regions” (p. 6).

Here, again, it is worth reiterating that a BRIDGE program can significantly contribute to helping students achieve these outcomes – ensuring that they have the opportunity to engage in meaningful and ongoing partnerships with their peers in other countries. Sustained engagement establishes fertile ground for students to develop – or advance – their intercultural competence and to learn to value the opportunity to interact with people from different cultural traditions.



The Education Declaration further emphasizes the importance of “delivering a world-class curriculum and assessment [that] supports students to become responsible local and global members of the community in an interconnected world” to “engage with complex ethical issues” and “develop practical skills in areas such as ICT, critical and creative thinking, intercultural understanding, and problem-solving” (p. 15). These skills support imagination, discovery, innovation, empathy, and creative solutions to complex problems, all of which are essential in the digital age.

Virtual interactions with their peers in other countries enables students to engage in meaningful dialogue on exactly these kinds of pertinent global issues, with intelligently designed programs able to incorporate a focus on Sustainable Development Goals, for example, and to give students the opportunity to consider different perspectives on these important topics, as well as enhancing their digital skills.

Overall, digital school partnerships such as the Australia-China Digital BRIDGE program can provide opportunities for schools and teachers to address the goals and principles outlined in the Alice Springs Education Declaration to empower students to thrive in an increasingly interconnected world, foster global citizenship and prepare them for the challenges and opportunities of a global future.

## Australian Government Foreign Relations (State and Territory Arrangements) Act 2020

While Federal Government Policy supports and encourages international engagement of schools, it also sets clear requirements for how these should be conducted. The Foreign Relations (State and Territory Arrangements) Act 2020 was enacted to provide a framework for the Australian federal government to regulate and oversee arrangements made by state and territory governments, local governments, and public universities with foreign entities (Commonwealth Government of Australia, 2020).

The Act introduces requirements for states, territories, and other entities to notify the Australian federal government of any arrangements or agreements they have or intend to enter with foreign entities. This includes partnerships with foreign schools or educational organizations. The act has also defined core and non-core foreign arrangements to differentiate between national, state and territory-level collaborations. International school partnerships are considered non-core foreign arrangements and are governed by the relevant state or territory Department of Education (Commonwealth Government of Australia, 2020, part 3).

The implications of the Act for international school partnerships include:

- 1. Increased scrutiny and regulation,** including a regulatory framework that requires approval from the Australian government for partnerships with foreign entities, including schools.
- 2. Risk assessment and due diligence** are both requirements of school partnerships, with a focus on the potential impact on national security, foreign relations, and Australia's interests.

- 3. Potential restrictions or termination of partnerships,** most importantly the ability of the Australian federal government to veto or terminate partnerships if they are found to be inconsistent with Australia's foreign policy objectives or pose a risk to national security or other interests.

- 4. Compliance and reporting requirements,** including the need to provide regular updates to the Australian government regarding the nature and progress of partnerships.

Each of these requirements provide important guidelines for schools involved in international partnerships to follow (Victorian Department of Education, 2021). This makes it challenging for schools to develop partnerships independently but reinforces the benefits of engagement through organised, long-term programs such as BRIDGE in which establishment and reporting requirements are managed by the coordinating organisation.

# ONLINE LEARNING

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the adoption of online learning and collaboration platforms, providing new opportunities for students and teachers to connect with peers and colleagues around the world (Sullivan, et. al., 2021).



Governments around the world have recognized the importance of online education and have implemented policies to support remote learning during the pandemic. The Australian government issued COVID-19 National Principles for School Education (2020), which encourages the use of remote teaching and learning to ensure continuity of education during the pandemic.

The rapid adoption of online learning has also presented challenges for teachers and they may struggle to develop effective online teaching systems in a short period of time (Sullivan et. al., 2021). The Australian Federal and State/Territory governments therefore recognised that it was crucial to provide teachers with professional development training to develop their digital literacy and support them in designing online teaching materials. This training is essential to ensure that teachers can provide engaging and effective online learning experiences for students (Victorian Department of Education, 2022, NSW Department of Education, 2023, Google for Education, 2023, Microsoft, 2023, Digital Technologies Hub, 2023 amongst others).

With a relatively favourable policy context in Australia and the increasing adoption of online learning, new opportunities for collaboration with international partners have emerged. As with any new skill, however, it is important to provide ample opportunities for practice. Teachers need professional learning opportunities to ensure they can develop effective online teaching practices and provide high-quality intercultural learning experiences to their students. The Digital BRIDGE Program is a valuable way for teachers to enhance their digital skills.

# CURRICULUM CONTEXT

Research indicates that international school partnerships are most effective when they are integrated into the curriculum, rather than being seen as an extra-curricular offering (AEF, 2014).

The Australian Curriculum has been designed to be three-dimensional. As well as the traditional learning areas, such as English, Mathematics, Sciences, Humanities and Social Sciences' and Social and the Arts, it also includes the cross-cutting dimensions of General Capabilities and the Cross-Curriculum priorities. Together, these three dimensions set out the knowledge, understanding and skills young Australians need to learn, contribute, and shape their world now and in the future (ACARA, 2022).

As well as potential links to learning areas such as Languages, Humanities and Social Sciences and the Arts, Digital BRIDGE program has two explicit links to the Australian Curriculum.

## Cross Curricular Priorities

The Australian Curriculum (V9) emphasises the importance of Asia knowledge, which is reflected in the cross-curriculum priority of Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia. From Foundation to Year 10, Australian students are expected to develop the necessary skills, understanding, and knowledge about Asia to better engage with Asian countries (ACARA, 2022).

International school partnerships such as the Digital BRIDGE program, provide an excellent opportunity for Australian teachers and educators to cultivate Asia capabilities and intercultural understanding among young Australians in an authentic way.

This emphasis in the curriculum builds on the 2012 Australian government's White Paper on Australia in the Asian Century (Australian Government, 2012).

The cross-curricular priority of Asia and Australia's Engagement with Asia has three elements (ACARA 2022):

### **Knowing Asia and its diversity**

This emphasises the need to appreciate the backgrounds, experiences, stories, religions, beliefs, and perspectives within and among the nations of the Asia region. It is supported by understanding Asia and Australia's interconnected environments, natural, managed and constructed, and the political, financial, and technological systems that drive relationships.

### **Understanding Asia's global significance**

This examines the ways in which different significant nations in Asia have effected change. People are central to global developments, with human endeavour expressed through aesthetic, creative, political, economic, and scientific pursuits. Highlighting key individuals, events, developments, or nations reinforces how they have contributed to Asia's global significance.

### **Growing Asia–Australia engagement**

This includes the relationship-building contribution of Australians with Asian heritage and explores how active connections between students and Asia's diverse communities can be deepened. Interaction builds empathy, respects cultural and linguistic differences, and leads to collaborative opportunities and outcomes. These active connections provide the lived experiences of global citizenship for young Australians, including through popular culture, and nurture relationships that reflect the historical and contemporary interdependency of Australia and the nations of Asia.

This highlighted the shift from Asia literacy to Asia capabilities, which focuses on developing skills and competencies to engage with Asian countries. The White Paper emphasised that Asia capability is critical for the Australian education workforce.

This has since been reiterated in numerous policy documents and reports. Building on the White Paper, the Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority and Asia Education Foundation have published a series of reports advocating the urgent need to cultivate the Asia capability of the Australian education workforce (AEF, 2015, AITSL, 2017).

## General Capabilities

**Intercultural understanding** is another vital aspect of the Australian Curriculum. The Australian Curriculum classifies intercultural understanding as one of the General capabilities, which involves students learning about and engaging with diverse cultures (ACARA, 2022). The Australian curriculum defines intercultural understanding as learning to value one's own culture, language, and beliefs, and those of others.

Australian schools are an ideal place for young Australians to develop their intercultural understanding with professional guidance



from teachers. In Australia, with its ethnically and culturally diverse population, it is crucial for young Australians to learn about, engage with and respect different cultures, recognise commonalities and celebrate differences between cultures, and create stronger connections across cultures.

By cultivating Asia capabilities and intercultural understanding, Australian teachers and educators can help prepare young Australians to be active and engaged global citizens in the digital age. The Digital BRIDGE program has been designed to do this.

The General Capability of Intercultural Understanding has three key elements (ACARA, 2022)

### **Reflect on the relationship between cultures and identities.**

This sub-element supports students to discuss their own cultural identities and draw connections with those of others. They transition from familiar to less familiar contexts and explore cultural continuity and change. They examine how people experience intercultural contexts differently.

### **Examine cultural perspectives and world views.**

This sub-element supports students to analyse how these are shaped, preserved or transmitted over time and place.

### **Explore the influence of cultures on interactions.**

This sub-element supports students to reflect on how their cultural identities relate to others and how others' cultural identities relate to them.

# BENEFITS OF DIGITAL SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS

Digital school partnerships offer various benefits at different levels, from the school level to the teacher level and student level.

Research has shown that international partnerships between educational institutions can promote cultural understanding between countries, increase access to information and artifacts in both countries, and broaden the view of the teaching profession in both countries (AEF 2014, AEF 2015, Monash University, 2018).

At the school level, participating in a digital school partnership can promote student learning and enhance teacher capability. It can also facilitate the implementation of the curriculum, particularly in the aspects of language learning and intercultural understanding. Additionally, it can help schools develop global networks and enhance community engagement (British Council, 2022).

For students, digital school partnerships offer unique opportunities to gain better understandings of other cultures, develop global citizenship, appreciate different perspectives, and hone 21st-century skills, including critical thinking and cross-cultural collaboration. Students can also develop greater competency and confidence in cross-cultural communication and establish international friendships and networks (eTwinning, 2022).

At the teacher level, participating in digital school partnerships can help school staff learn from other school systems, gain better intercultural understanding and sensitivity, and increase their awareness of different educational practices, including pedagogies and curriculum designs. They can also develop greater competency and confidence in cross-cultural communication (Monash University, 2018).

Although in their infancy, digital school partnerships have been proven to provide a range of benefits that can support schools, teachers, and students enhance their intercultural understanding, develop 21st-century skills, and form global networks.



# DIGITAL SCHOOL PARTNERSHIP PROGRAMS

Digital school partnership programs around the world have proven to be invaluable in fostering global connections and promoting educational excellence (British Council, 2022; Licht, et. al., 2020). These programs provide opportunities for schools and teachers to collaborate, exchange ideas, and enhance student learning through the effective use of digital technologies. The following examples of digital school partnerships from around the world demonstrate this:

## BRIDGE School Partnerships Program

The BRIDGE School Partnerships Program, a flagship program of the Asia Education Foundation, has established over 540 international school partnerships across the Asia-Pacific region (AEF, 2023). It has built the capacity of schools and educators through blended professional learning focused on cross-cultural understanding, the use of new technologies, and global competence. This program has positively impacted thousands of students in participating countries.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the BRIDGE program adapted to online delivery, ensuring cultural exchange and insights were still central to the learning experience and at the heart of partnership communication and collaboration. The program employed a range of synchronous and asynchronous online experiences, cultural workshops, and resources to maintain engagement and accessibility for participants.

Launched in late 2022 thanks to funding from the National Foundation for Australia-China Relations, the Australia-China Digital BRIDGE program includes a teacher training program, resources, and platforms that support teachers' digital skills and pedagogical approaches, as well as opportunities for collaboration and ongoing engagement (AEF, 2023).

The Australia-China Digital BRIDGE Program has effectively facilitated the creation of professional connections between Australian and Chinese educators. Participating teachers have reported positive changes in their teaching practices and the development of international friendships, enriching their professional networks. Many participants found it to be a rewarding professional experience and would recommend it to their peers.

## Global Schools Program

The Global Schools Program, initiated by the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network, has created a strong global network of 1,560 schools in more than 105 countries (Global Schools Program, 2023). Through online and offline activities, this program equips students with the knowledge, values, and skills needed to address the challenges of the 21st century.

## Global Education Program

True Education Partnership's Global Education Program (UK) has adapted to the challenges of COVID-19 by introducing virtual school partnerships, such as the China and Spanish online immersion program (True Education Partnerships, 2023). These virtual programs break down cultural barriers, exchange pedagogy, knowledge, and expertise, and offer unique, life-changing experiences for all participants.





### Global Learning Schools

The Centre for Global Education’s Global Learning Schools Program has implemented a commendable digital school partnership program that connects schools across Northern Ireland (Centre for Global Education, 2023). Through their program, they facilitate collaborative projects and exchanges between students, teachers, and schools, promoting global learning and intercultural understanding. The program utilizes digital platforms to enable virtual interactions.

### Digital School Partnership Program

The British Council’s Digital School Partnership Program is renowned for its extensive digital school partnership program, which connects schools in the UK with schools around the world (British Council, 2023). The program provides a platform for teachers and students to collaborate, share ideas, and engage in cross-cultural learning experiences. The British Council leverages various digital tools and resources to facilitate communication and collaboration between partner schools, (British Council, 2020).

### International Education and Resource Network

International Education and Resource Network (iEARN) based in the United States, has established an impressive digital school partnership program that spans more than 140 countries (iEARN, 2023). iEARN’s program emphasizes virtual project-based learning and collaborative activities that encourage students to work together on global issues and develop innovative solutions.

### eTwinning

The European Union’s eTwinning Program is a digital school partnership program that aims to connect schools and educators across Europe and beyond (European Commission, 2022). It provides a platform for collaborative projects and exchanges, fostering international cooperation and cross-cultural learning. eTwinning is designed for teachers and school staff from pre-primary to secondary education levels. It entails virtual collaboration, where teachers and students from different countries work together on various educational activities, such as project-based learning, joint research, language, and cultural exchanges.



Overall, these digital school partnership programs have demonstrated their value in promoting cultural understanding and Global Citizenship (British Council, 2022), enhancing educational practices (Licht, et. al., 2020), and fostering global collaboration (Licht, et. al., 2020), making them invaluable resources for teachers and students worldwide.

Each program shares common features, and this reinforces the justification behind the design of the Australia-China Digital BRIDGE Program. They highlight the importance of utilizing digital platforms to connect students and educators globally. Through their innovative approaches, they are making significant contributions to the field of global education and providing valuable opportunities for teachers and students to engage in meaningful cross-cultural learning experiences.



## SECTION TWO

# SUCCESSFUL DIGITAL SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS

In this section, we delve into synchronous and asynchronous collaboration, and explore digital tools and platforms to use through school partnerships. We examine examples of school partnership activities from the Australia-China Digital BRIDGE program, highlighting the importance of clear communication, shared goals, and mutual understanding. We also consider how digital school partnerships can enhance digital pedagogy and global citizenship.

# DIGITAL SKILLS

A key imperative for the success of a virtual program is that teachers and students are comfortable and confident in the use of the digital platforms and tools that facilitate interactions.

Despite assumptions about ‘digital natives’ there is ample evidence that many teachers and students are not highly skilled in optimising digital learning opportunities (OECD, 2020).

Since digital literacy cannot be assumed in advance, and hence it is important to invest time in providing building blocks for participants to gain the requisite digital tools. During the professional learning component of the Australia-China Digital BRIDGE program, participating educators had opportunities to enhance their skills and confidence in using various technological tools to support their partnership projects, collaboration, and teaching practice. They shared examples tools and technologies they use in their classrooms and schools.

There is no defined set of tools that suit digital partnerships – instead, tools need

to be selected based on the discrete needs of each program. Their ability to facilitate communication and foster global collaboration between schools, teachers, and students in the digital age should be the key selection criterion. In addition, the same or different tools should be able to enhance student learning experiences.

Through hands-on practice and experimentation, students and teachers can gain practical experience in using digital tools within the context of their partnership projects and classroom environments. Data gathered during the Australia-China Digital BRIDGE program indicated that both groups were able to develop a clear understanding of how to effectively apply these tools to enhance both their partnership initiatives and classroom teaching practices.

92% of Digital BRIDGE participants agreed that they are more equipped to use a range of digital tools in their teaching and learning.<sup>1</sup>

*“What impressed me most was the tech lesson which introduced a lot of practical tools, and sometimes all we need is the right method or tool.”*

*- Digital BRIDGE Chinese participant*

*“I have incorporated more digital tools shared by other teachers into my lessons and have included resources/information from my partner school in my lesson plans, the feedback from students has been really positive.”*

*- Digital BRIDGE Australian participant*

<sup>1</sup> Based on post-program survey responses from 97 participants (as of 2 June 2023).

## Synchronous Collaboration

In the realm of digital school partnerships, synchronous communication tools play a vital role in enabling real-time interactions among participating teachers and schools. These tools have proven to enhance social presence and promote high interpersonal engagement in educational settings.

In the context of the Australia-China Digital BRIDGE program, various synchronous communication tools have been widely used, with Zoom being a prominent choice. Zoom was selected for several reasons:

- many schools utilise Zoom and are already used to its functionality.
- Zoom has collaborative features including chat and virtual reactions that can be used in large groups.
- it is easy to create break-out groups in zoom to enable students and teachers to engage in small-group activities.
- Zoom is easy to install on a range of digital devices.

Overall, the experience of the Australia-China Digital BRIDGE program was that Zoom provided a good combination of accessibility, cost-effectiveness and collaborative functionality that made it suitable to support student and teacher engagement. This is not to suggest, however, that other platforms such as Microsoft Teams, WebEx and Google Classrooms are unsuitable for use. Indeed, participants in the Australia-China Digital BRIDGE program commonly employed other tools during meetings and to foster collaboration between partner schools.

## Asynchronous Collaboration

The inclusion of asynchronous communication tools in digital school partnerships provides flexibility and enables participants to engage in discussions without the need for immediate responses. It also addresses the difference in time zones between different countries that can reduce the hours available for synchronous engagement between schools.

Within the Australia-China Digital BRIDGE program, participating teachers used a range of asynchronous communication tools, including WeChat and emails. For instance, teachers formed WeChat groups to discuss and co-design student collective projects following the completion of professional learning sessions.

One of the reasons for utilising WeChat was due to its popularity in China, and hence teacher and student comfort in using this tool. This underscores the importance of selecting tools to fit the needs of particular programs, based on cohort characteristics and engagement needs. In the Australia-China Digital BRIDGE program, teachers in Australia were much less accustomed to using WeChat than their colleagues in China. This provided an opportunity for interaction, with teachers based in Australia being guided by their Chinese partners on joining WeChat groups and effectively utilizing its functions.

Another platform that was used was the digital platform Milanote. Milanote offers the possibility of organising ideas and projects into visual boards. This tool served as a central repository for program materials and task outlines for the second cohort of the Australia-China Digital BRIDGE program. While it did not facilitate extensive communication among the cohort, it effectively served as a central information hub for participants.

As illustrated by choices made in the Australia-China Digital BRIDGE program, by leveraging the combined strengths of a range of synchronous and asynchronous communication tools, teachers and students can collaborate efficiently, exchange ideas, and engage in meaningful learning experiences that transcend geographical boundaries.

## Other platforms and tools

The Summary Table below provides an overview of various tools that can be used for online collaboration and communication in the context of digital school partnerships as well as to enhance student learning.

The table categorizes these tools into five main categories:

- Communication
- Collaboration
- Student Learning
- Video Creation, and
- Others.

Under Communication, tools such as Class Dojo, Dingding, Microsoft Teams, and Zoom offer effective ways for real-time communication and collaboration among teachers and schools.

The Collaboration category includes platforms like Canvas, Microsoft 365, OneNote, and Whiteboard.fi, facilitating seamless collaboration and resource sharing.

Tools like Brainpop, Duolingo, Kahoot, and Minecraft EDU fall under Student Learning, offering engaging and interactive learning experiences.

Lastly, the Video Creation category features tools like Adobe Express, Loom, and ClickView, enabling the creation and sharing of educational videos.

We hope that this comprehensive summary table can serve as a valuable resource for teachers seeking effective digital tools to enhance their online collaboration and communication practices, including in their school partnerships.



## TECHNOLOGY TOOLS SUMMARY TABLE

Category	Tool	Description	Weblink
Communication	Class Dojo	Classroom communication and behaviour management tool	<a href="#">Class Dojo</a>
	Dingding	Communication and collaboration platform	<a href="#">Dingding</a>
	Microsoft Teams	Collaboration and communication platform	<a href="#">Microsoft Teams</a>
	WhatsApp	Instant messaging and communication platform	<a href="#">WhatsApp</a>
	Zoom	Video conferencing and collaboration platform	<a href="#">Zoom</a>
Collaboration	Canvas	Learning management system for schools	<a href="#">Canvas</a>
	Google Classroom	Learning management system for classrooms	<a href="#">Google Classroom</a>
	Google Suite	Suite of productivity tools for collaboration	<a href="#">Google Suite</a>
	Microsoft 365	Suite of productivity tools for collaboration	<a href="#">Microsoft 365</a>
	MIRO	Online collaborative whiteboard and visual workspace	<a href="#">MIRO</a>
	OneNote	Digital notetaking and collaboration tool	<a href="#">OneNote</a>
	Padlet	Digital bulletin board for collaborative work	<a href="#">Padlet</a>
	Seewo	Classroom management and collaboration platform	<a href="#">Seewo</a>
Whiteboard.fi	Online whiteboard for real-time collaboration	<a href="#">Whiteboard.fi</a>	
Student Learning	Blooket	Educational game platform	<a href="#">Blooket</a>
	Desmos	Online graphing calculator and math tools	<a href="#">Desmos</a>
	Duolingo	Language learning platform	<a href="#">Duolingo</a>
	GeoGebra	Math learning and graphing tool	<a href="#">GeoGebra</a>
	GoNoodle	Platform designed to promote physical activity and mindfulness	<a href="#">GoNoodle</a>
	Google Arts and Culture	Online art and cultural platform	<a href="#">Google Arts and Culture</a>
	Kahoot	Game-based learning platform	<a href="#">Kahoot</a>
	Minecraft EDU	Educational version of Minecraft	<a href="#">Minecraft EDU</a>
	Quizzlet	Flashcard and quiz-based learning platform	<a href="#">Quizzlet</a>
	Twinkl	Educational resources and materials	<a href="#">Twinkl</a>
Video Creation	Adobe Express	Photo editing and design tool	<a href="#">Adobe Express</a>
	ClickView	Video platform for educational content	<a href="#">ClickView</a>
	Flipgrid	Video discussion platform for classrooms	<a href="#">Flipgrid</a>
	Loom	Video recording and sharing tool	<a href="#">Loom</a>
	YouTube	Video-sharing platform	<a href="#">YouTube</a>
Others	Mentimeter	Interactive presentation and polling tool	<a href="#">Mentimeter</a>
	Qualtrics	Online survey platform	<a href="#">Qualtrics</a>
	Sli.do	Audience interaction platform for presentations and events	<a href="#">Sli.do</a>
	Virtual Tours	Platform for creating and sharing virtual tours	<a href="#">Virtual Tours</a>

# ONLINE PARTNERSHIP ACTIVITIES

## Building trust

Achieving successful digital partnerships requires trust to be built before anything else takes place. This cannot be left to happenstance. It instead requires both intent, and the careful planning and execution of educational activities. The Australia-China Digital BRIDGE professional learning program focused on establishing meaningful collaborations between participating schools and teachers.

During the Australia-China Digital BRIDGE program, the regular professional learning sessions provided practical guidance on constructing partnership relations and facilitating productive communication. Through a series of activities, teachers were guided and encouraged to discuss collaboration expectations, foster friendships, and build strong partnerships.

The AEF supported participating schools and teachers in designing and planning collaborative student projects, covering important topics such as student wellbeing, language learning, and intercultural understanding.

The ultimate success of the school partnership activities that teachers undertook during the Australia-China Digital BRIDGE program can be attributed to the program emphasis on building strong relationships, the commitment of participating schools and teachers, and bridging cultural understanding. These elements contributed to positive outcomes and meaningful learning experiences for all involved in the program.

In the following section, we showcase several school partnership projects from the Australia-China Digital BRIDGE program. The focus of these projects was on fostering cultural exchange, student wellbeing, mindfulness, and healthy habits. Teachers from Australian and Chinese schools collaborated to plan and

implement activities that engaged students and promoted meaningful connections.

As these examples illustrate, the use of various digital tools and platforms facilitated communication and allowed students to share their experiences, language, and culture. For example, students

- introduced their schools to peers through online platforms.
- engaged in mindfulness practices using dedicated applications.
- shared class projects that focused on a wide range of topics.
- compared differences and similarities between schools, and
- conducted virtual live lessons.

These activities not only strengthened relationships between partner schools but also provided opportunities for students to develop language skills, build confidence, improve wellbeing, and enhance global awareness. Through the successful implementation of these projects, students and teachers gained valuable insights, deepened their understanding of different cultures, and established a strong foundation for ongoing collaboration.

## Exemplar partnership activities

These examples have been selected to reveal the diversity of activities that were undertaken under the Australia-China Digital BRIDGE program. They have been selected to demonstrate example projects in a range of subject areas, geographical regions, and educational levels.

### **Dongcheng Middle School affiliated to Hangzhou Normal University & Brisbane South State Secondary College (QLD)**

The teachers of Dongcheng Middle School and Brisbane South State Secondary College collaborated on a cooperative course called "Mouth." This course aimed to facilitate language exchange and cultural understanding among Year 8 students, with each letter of "Mouth" representing a different topic, namely M - music, O - ode, U - yourself, T - taste, H - healing. Through practical guides and workshops, the teachers worked closely together to prepare for the course, addressing potential challenges, and ensuring effective implementation. Learn more about this partnership in Snapshot 2 on page 35.

### **Hangzhou Aoti Experimental Primary School & Charters Towers School of Distance Education (QLD)**

The partnership between Hangzhou Aoti Experimental Primary School and Charters Towers School of Distance Education focused on introducing students in Years 3 - 6 to each other's schools via the internet. Through ice-breaker activities and group discussions, students shared insights into their cultures, identifying both similarities and differences. The project aimed to improve student well-being by providing opportunities for open communication and a deeper understanding of school environments.

### **Dongcheng Experimental School affiliated to Hangzhou Normal University & Mentone Girls' Secondary College (VIC)**

Mentone Girls' Secondary College collaborated with Dongcheng Experimental School on a project centred around communication, teamwork, and collaboration. The focus was to foster relationships among Year 8 and 9 students in the classroom, addressing the challenges faced during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as difficulties in forming friendships and increased anxiety. The project aimed to enhance students' social and emotional skills through interactive activities and collaborative learning experiences.

### **Tangxia Experimental Primary School, Silvertown Primary School & Leongatha Primary School (VIC)**

Teachers from Tangxia Experimental Primary School, Silvertown Primary School, and Leongatha Primary School designed activities to explore the differences and similarities between Chinese and Australian schools. Year 4 and 5 students engaged in comparing their school experiences using tools such as Venn diagrams and video presentations. The project aimed to promote cultural exchange, broaden students' perspectives, and foster mutual understanding. Learn more about this partnership in Snapshot 4 on page 38.



### **Pudong Experimental High School Affiliated to Shanghai Jiaotong University & Suzanne Cory High School (VIC)**

Pudong Experimental High School and Suzanne Cory High School collaborated on a project promoting healthy eating habits. Year 10 students participated in a healthy eating quiz and set personal goals based on their quiz results. The project aimed to raise awareness about nutrition and encourage students to make healthier food choices. By conducting surveys and analysing nutritional labels, students gained insights into their dietary habits and proposed ideas for promoting healthy eating in their schools.

### **Hangzhou Guanlan Primary School & The Hutchins School (TAS)**

Hangzhou Guanlan Primary School and The Hutchins School organized virtual live lessons, allowing Year 6 students from both schools to interact in real-time. The sessions involved language greetings, Q&A sessions, and performances showcasing each country's culture. Despite occasional technical challenges, the project successfully integrated global perspectives and laid the foundation for future collaborations. Learn more about this partnership in Snapshot 3 on page 37

### **Shanghai Arete Bilingual School & MacKillop Catholic College (NT)**

Teachers from Shanghai Arete Bilingual School and MacKillop Catholic College aim to organise cultural experience exchanges and debates between students from both schools to increase their self-awareness and enhance their understanding of each other's cultures, customs and societies. They held an initial Zoom session with a small group of Year 10 students to test student motivation and technology, which worked well as a first experiment and confirmed students are interested in continuing to learn from each other. Their next step is to invite students to choose and design an activity to run together.

### **Hangzhou Tonglu High School, Shanghai New Huangpu Experimental School & Orange Christian School (NSW)**

Teachers from Hangzhou Tonglu High School, Shanghai New Huangpu Experimental School & Orange Christian School identified that a shared problem their students are facing is their identity in the future and the pressure of getting into university and getting a good job. In response, they aimed to work on a solution to help students with relaxation and coping with anxiety or stress. They are planning to run an initial activity to integrate music or a game in their respective classes to help with relaxation and increase student engagement in class content and share the outcomes of this experiment with each other to help improve their teaching methods.

### **Shanghai Hongwen School & Radford College (ACT)**

Shanghai Hongwen School & Radford College are planning to run a pen pal program and organise Zoom meets between their students to help them improve their language skills and become more globally aware. For their first partnership experiment, and as a way for their Year 10 and 11 students to get to know each other, they decided to help motivate student to develop healthy habits by choosing an activity they don't usually do, do it every day for 7 days and record their reflections.

# DIGITAL PEDAGOGY

The shift to online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic was initially extremely challenging for schools and teachers.

After undergoing a steep learning curve, the sudden switch to online teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic provided a valuable opportunity for educators to re-evaluate their instructional methods and explore the effective implementation of digital pedagogies. Arguably, this dramatically sped up the shift to incorporating virtual modes into teaching and learning, enabling adoption much more quickly than would otherwise have happened.

While there are multiple definitions and models of digital pedagogy, it can be broadly defined as using digital technologies to enhance teaching effectiveness, enrich student experiences, and create new learning opportunities. The integration of technology into the learning process has the potential to change the nature of learning and the role of

*“Technology has furthered the shift towards more independent, student led inquiry modes of learning. Teachers now assume the role of co-collaborator or eModerator. So technology appears to be more than a mere tool in the classroom: it changes how and what we learn” (p.5)*

the teacher. As Howell (2013) notes: Digital pedagogy is multi-dimensional. The diagram below illustrates the intersection of three key dimensions of pedagogy that combine to comprise digital pedagogy – pedagogical orientation, pedagogical practices, and digital pedagogical practices (Howell, 2013). Each of these three dimensions requires a set of actions and skills, including the digitization of educational content, the establishment of digital learning environments, and the integration of digital tools into daily teaching practices.

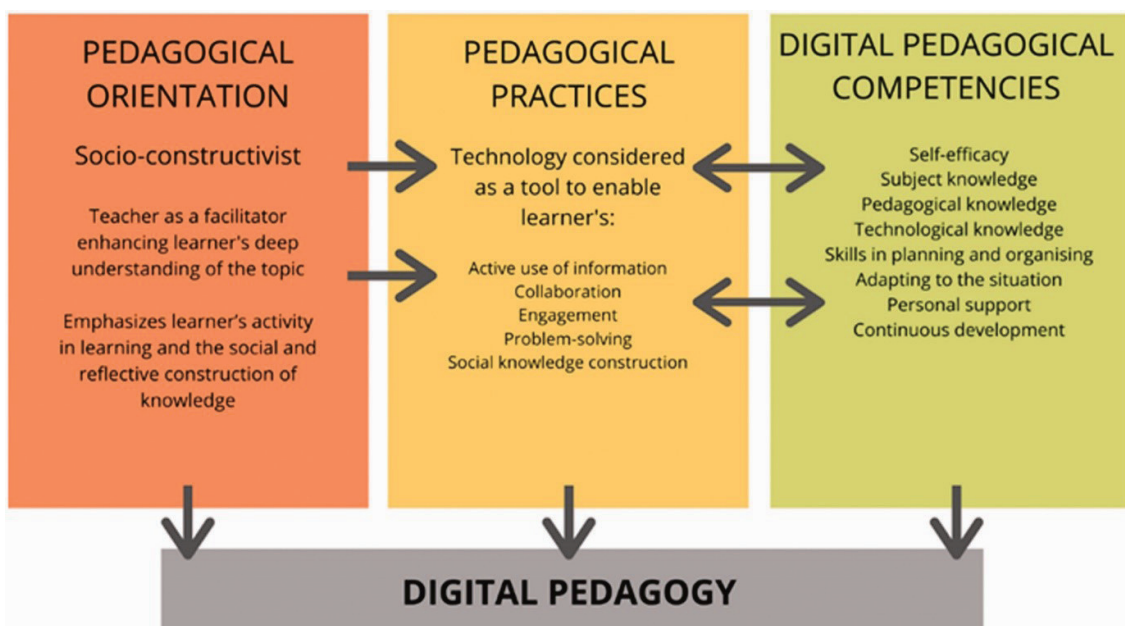


Figure 1: Components of Digital Pedagogy (Howell, 2013)

Despite the guidance provided to teachers, they can still find it challenging to implement digital pedagogy in their classes. Teachers can be nervous to be 'shown up' by their students for their inferior digital skills, or struggle to cope when technology fails. Virtual partnership programs can provide a safe space for teachers to try out various technical applications and learn from their peers in how best to incorporate them in class.

To embrace digital pedagogy, teachers need access to three key components. Together these generate a cohesive educational environment. As Toktarova and Semenova (2020) specify, there are three main approaches to digitalised educational practices:

- digitalized learning content involves transforming educational materials into digital formats, enabling students to engage with digital resources and develop their cognitive and communication skills.
- digitalized learning environments facilitate communication and collaboration among teachers and students through the use of digital platforms.
- digitalized learning tools, such as multimedia and cloud technologies, are incorporated into teaching practices to promote student engagement and interactive learning experiences.

One of the advantages of digital pedagogy is that it can enable an educational activity to be tailored to the needs of individual students. By leveraging artificial intelligence, big data, and digital pedagogy, teachers can personalize the learning experience for each student by tracking their progress, designing individualized learning plans, and implementing adaptive learning systems.

Digital tools also facilitate the management of the learning process by teachers. With the appropriate tools, they can effectively manage the learning process by creating comprehensive digital records that assist students in planning, organizing, and preparing their learning activities.

While digital pedagogy presents numerous benefits for student learning and teaching practices, it is crucial for educators to address the emotional and social challenges that students may encounter in the digital learning environment (Lin & Nguyen, 2021). It is important to note that emotional and social challenges are not unique to digital environments. Analogue learning environments can also engender negative responses. Nevertheless, the potential negative responses to digital pedagogy are distinct in nature.

As with analogue pedagogy, it is important for teachers to prioritize students' wellbeing. This may mean providing additional support to help them navigate online learning successfully. Incorporating peer-to-peer support activities and fostering collaboration opportunities within digitalized teaching practices can create an inclusive and vibrant learning environment for all students. Assuming that students are 'digital natives' and therefore do not need this support must be avoided, as this leads to erroneous approaches that can impede learning.

# DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP

Digital citizenship encompasses nine elements, including digital access, digital commerce, digital communication, digital etiquette, digital literacy, digital health and welfare, digital law, digital right and responsibility, digital security and privacy.

In an educational context, digital citizenship education focuses on nurturing students' understanding and behaviours in using these technologies, discouraging improper online practices like cyberbullying and harmful contact (NSW Department of Education, 2023).

Researchers identify four main categories of digital citizenship in the 21st century: ethics, media and information literacy, participation/engagement, and critical resistance (Searson et al., 2015).



Figure 2: Nine Elements of Digital Citizenship <sup>2</sup> (AGParts Education, 2021)

All these categories of digital citizenship have practical implications for educational practices. This means that it is important that teachers integrate them into their online teaching curriculum. This includes teaching students how to take responsibility as active online members, be productive contributors to online communities, express ideas, and opinions online, and evaluate information critically. Once again, it is important that teachers never assume that students are already conversant with any of these aspects.

To achieve these goals, teachers can design activities such as online information search practices to develop students' skills in obtaining useful information strategically. Interactive activities like creating trending hashtags on social media and facilitating critical discussions on social issues can also foster digital citizenship (Searson et al., 2015).

International digital school partnerships provide a powerful platform for teaching digital citizenship. In programs like the Australia-China Digital BRIDGE program, teachers are encouraged to collaborate with partner schools to facilitate communication between their students. This offers valuable opportunities for students to practice their digital and intercultural communication skills. By designing collaborative online activities with partner schools, teachers can effectively educate their students about digital citizenship and engage them as positive contributors to the global digital world.

In summary, digital citizenship education can be purposefully integrated into online learning. Teachers are encouraged to incorporate digital citizenship education into their daily practices to develop students' competence and confidence in the digital world. Additionally, it is important to continuously reflect on and evaluate students' digital capacity in digital citizenship education, ensuring that the lessons imparted are meaningful and impactful.



# CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

Drawing on the experiences of Digital BRIDGE program participants, we outline some of the common challenges they faced in establishing their school partnerships and collaborating online, as well as some solutions and best practices to overcome these challenges.

Challenges	Solutions
<p><b>Scheduling and Time Differences:</b> Coordinating activities and projects between schools in different time zones can be challenging. The misalignment of schedules may require flexibility and understanding from both parties to find suitable times for collaboration</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish a shared calendar or scheduling system to coordinate activities and find mutually convenient times for collaboration.</li> <li>• Embrace asynchronous communication methods, such as email or discussion boards, to allow participants to contribute at their own pace.</li> <li>• Be flexible and understanding when accommodating time differences, making compromises to ensure equitable participation.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Language and Communication Barriers:</b> When schools from different countries collaborate, language and communication barriers can arise. Teachers and students may face challenges in effectively communicating their ideas and understanding each other's perspectives. Overcoming these barriers often requires patience, creative communication methods, and language support</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide language support and translation services, such as using translation tools or involving bilingual teachers or students in the communication process.</li> <li>• Use visual aids, diagrams, and multimedia resources to enhance understanding and facilitate communication.</li> <li>• Encourage open and inclusive communication, where participants feel comfortable asking clarifying questions and seeking clarification.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Technological Infrastructure and Connectivity:</b> Engaging in digital partnerships relies heavily on technology and internet connectivity. Unequal access to technology and reliable internet connections can hinder effective collaboration. Schools may need to address these disparities by providing necessary resources and support to ensure equal participation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify and address technology disparities by providing necessary resources, such as devices and internet connectivity, to ensure equal access for all participants.</li> <li>• Conduct technology training sessions or workshops to enhance participants' digital literacy skills and familiarize them with collaboration tools.</li> <li>• Establish contingency plans or alternative communication channels in case of technical issues or disruptions.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Cultural Differences and Contextual Understanding:</b> Cultural differences can impact the success of school partnerships. Each school may have different educational practices, values, and expectations, which need to be understood and respected. Building cultural competence and promoting intercultural understanding are essential for successful collaborations.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seek support from school leaders and administrators to allocate resources, including funding and staff time, for partnership activities.</li> <li>• Establish clear objectives and goals for the partnership, aligning them with the school's strategic priorities.</li> <li>• Create a dedicated support team or committee to oversee and coordinate partnership activities, ensuring ongoing institutional support.</li> </ul>

## Challenges

### **Adaptation to Changing Circumstances:**

External factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic can disrupt school partnerships and require quick adaptation to changing circumstances. Flexibility, resilience, and the ability to find alternative approaches are vital for overcoming these challenges

## Solutions

- Embrace digital tools and platforms that facilitate remote collaboration and enable continuity during challenging circumstances.
- Maintain regular communication channels to stay updated on changing circumstances and adjust plans accordingly.
- Encourage flexibility and creative problem-solving to find alternative approaches when faced with unforeseen challenges.

By implementing these potential solutions and best practices, school partnerships can enhance their collaboration, foster meaningful connections, and overcome common challenges. However, it's important to adapt these strategies to the specific context and needs of each partnership.



## SECTION THREE

# SNAPSHOTS OF BEST PRACTICE

In this section, we provide five snapshots of good practice in digital school partnerships from the Australia-China Digital BRIDGE program. They highlight what the teachers involved did to make them successful online partnerships. We focus on the activities that they collaborated on, their outcomes, the challenges they overcame, and any advice they have for colleagues trying to implement similar activities.



# SNAPSHOT 1

## Corinda State High School (QLD) and Shanghai Zhiyuan Middle School 上海市致远中学

Corinda State High School and Shanghai Zhiyuan Middle School collaborated on a geography project focused on exploring the liveability and biological environments of their respective campuses and surrounding areas.

The project encouraged Year 7 students to showcase the unique aspects and beauty of their living environment, such as the flora and fauna on their campuses, the use of solar and wind power, and the food served in school canteens.

The success of this collaborative project not only deepened the engagement between the two schools but also laid the foundation for a long-lasting partnership. With the support of the local education department, Corinda State High School and Shanghai Zhiyuan Middle School even planted pomegranate trees on their campuses as a symbolic representation of their partnership and future prosperity.

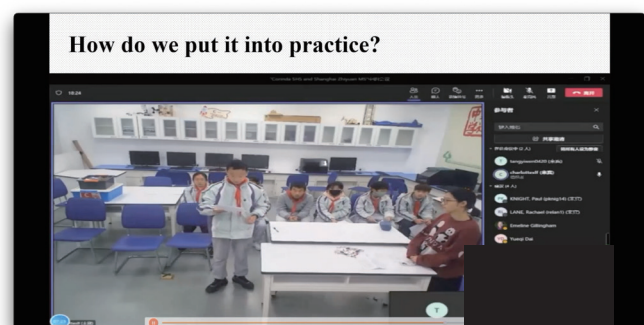
The Digital BRIDGE program offered a timely opportunity for students and teachers from both schools to engage in authentic international learning, especially during the challenging circumstances imposed by the pandemic.

Mr. Knight, a teacher from Corinda State High School, expressed his appreciation for the collaboration, stating that despite the COVID lockdown, they were able to plan and design a project, share pedagogical values, and help students stretch their capabilities beyond their usual limits.

Similarly, Ms. Xia, a teacher from Shanghai Zhiyuan Middle School, expressed gratitude for the connections with international school partners, as they provided pedagogical inspiration and encouraged her to reflect on and innovate her teaching practices. She also highlighted the program's introduction of various educational technologies during the professional learning sessions, which helped

her enhance her digital teaching skills. Reflecting on their digital partnership experience, the teachers agreed the key to success was the development of shared understandings based on mutual respect and collaboration. Following the professional learning sessions, teachers from both schools closely collaborated to identify commonalities between their institutions and shared interests among students and themselves.

Ms. Xia emphasised that the project's success was a result of the collective effort of teachers from both schools, who fostered a warm and welcoming environment for collaboration. Mr. Knight acknowledged the value of appreciating the personal difficulties they faced and sharing empathy with their partners. Building strong interpersonal relationships between partner teachers proved to be invaluable in establishing sustainable connections.



Participating in the program brought numerous benefits to the students at Corinda State High School and Shanghai Zhiyuan Middle School. They had the opportunity to develop intercultural skills, including self-expression and an appreciation for diversity.

As Ms. Xia noted, ‘education goes beyond academic performance and should equip students with the soft skills required in a globalized world’. Mr. Knight added that the program provided his students with a broader worldview, enabling them to recognize similarities and differences across cultures. By giving them a more extensive experience beyond their immediate surroundings, the program expanded their horizons and perspectives.



**The Australia-China Digital Bridge Program  
Ecological Project**

**“International partnership between Corinda State High School & Shanghai Zhiyuan Middle School”**

**A snapshot of the ecology of our school communities using the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal; ‘Good Health and Wellbeing.’**

The composite image consists of four main elements: on the left, a photograph of a student wearing a green bucket hat and holding a camera; in the center, a green square containing the number '3', the text 'GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING', and a white icon of a heartbeat line with a heart; on the right, a red square containing the number '4', the text 'QUALITY EDUCATION', and a white icon of an open book and a pencil; and on the far right, a solid green square.

## SNAPSHOT 2

Hangzhou Dongcheng Middle School and Brisbane South State Secondary College (QLD)  
杭州师范大学东城中学

Hangzhou Dongcheng Middle School and Brisbane Southern State Secondary College successfully co-designed, co-organised, and co-delivered a series of events aimed at fostering language and cultural understanding among Year 8 students.

The positive outcomes of their participation have led them to explore the potential of establishing a long-lasting partnership between their schools. The project focused on promoting authentic language learning experiences, encouraging students to develop meaningful friendships while learning from and with each other.

The collaborative projects were guided by the identification of common elements in the Australian and Chinese curricula and shared interests between Australian and Chinese students. Ms. Wang from Hangzhou Dongcheng Middle School emphasised,

*"We extend and enrich learning activities from the existing curriculum, providing dual benefits for our students by enhancing their academic performance and expanding their personal experiences."*

Dr Richards from Brisbane Southern State Secondary College added,

*"Through engaging in collaborative activities, students are showing increased interest in learning Chinese, which is a challenging language to study."*

Both schools are delighted to observe improved student engagement and increased motivation for learning because of this digital school partnership. Ms. Wang further highlighted the significant enhancement in cultural confidence among her students, explaining that they are learning to voice their opinions confidently, become advocates for

their community, and even represent their country.

Teachers participating in the Digital BRIDGE program also reap significant benefits. Ms. Wang shares,

*"I can see my personal growth through this program. I have become a learner, coordinator, organizer, problem solver, and designer. I am able to mobilize all my skills to make this program successful. For that, I am grateful to my school and the BRIDGE team for empowering me to become more professional."*

Topic	Period	Content & Objectives	Fruits
Music		to sing and share	songs
Ode		to read and repeat	poems
U		to speak and show	self-portrait
Taste		to eat and express	cooking vlog
Hailing		to render and remember	email

Topic	Period	Content & Objectives	Fruits
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Taste		to eat and express	cooking vlog
Hailing		to render and remember	email

走出语言舒适圈，为世界文化发声。

I'M OUT OF HERE

The program provides teachers with opportunities to develop international program planning abilities, allowing them to expand their skills and advance their careers.

The success of the partnership between Hangzhou Dongcheng Middle School and Brisbane Southern State Secondary College serves as an exemplary model for international education practices. Ms. Wang shared several suggestions based on her experience.

First, develop a team structure that encompasses individuals who can contribute in their unique ways. Second, remain open to learning new ideas and engage in critical self-reflection. Lastly, commit to the program and design collaborative projects that benefit students, teachers, and the school as a whole.



## SNAPSHOT 3

### The Hutchins School (TAS) and Hangzhou Guanlan Primary School 杭州市钱塘区观澜小学

The Hutchins School, located in Hobart, Tasmania, collaborated with Hangzhou Guanlan Primary School Year 6 students to successfully complete student learning projects that celebrate cultural differences and foster intercultural understanding.

One of the most memorable activities took place during Christmas 2022. Ms. Liang shared,

*"We prepared a Merry Christmas English version, and our partner school prepared a Happy New Year in Chinese. It was a big day, and each group of students were able to ask each other questions."*

These activities go beyond language learning, as Ms. Liang emphasised in an interview. Students engaged in meaningful and memorable cultural learning experiences that help them develop not only language and communication skills but also foster international understanding and create friendships.

Reflecting on her personal development through participating in the Digital BRIDGE program, Ms. Liang remarked,

*"I am not just a language teacher; I am also an international activity facilitator."*

The digital school partnership has been particularly valuable for Ms. Liang to connect with international partners during the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. She described the collaboration process as both productive and enjoyable, stating,

*"We never stop thinking and come up with wonderful ideas and are able to bring these ideas to life. The BRIDGE program provides me with a platform to get to know each other."*

Mutual understanding and commitment are key factors in contributing to a collective project. As Ms. Liang highlighted, the schedules between Chinese and Australian schools may not always align perfectly, so it is crucial to be understanding of each partner's situation. With this foundation of mutual understanding, the commitment between the two schools becomes a crucial element for organizing successful collaborative projects.<sup>3</sup>



<sup>3</sup> Please note that unfortunately we were not able to interview teachers from Hangzhou Guanlan Primary School to contribute to this snapshot.

# SNAPSHOT 4

Leongatha Primary School, Silvertown Primary School (VIC) and Tangxia Experimental Primary School 塘下实验小学

The collaborative project between Leongatha Primary School, Silvertown Primary School and Tangxia Experimental Primary School involved comparing timetables to discover the similarities and differences between Australian and Chinese school life. Through this project, students in both schools had the opportunity to appreciate cultural differences in education and develop an understanding of different school experiences.

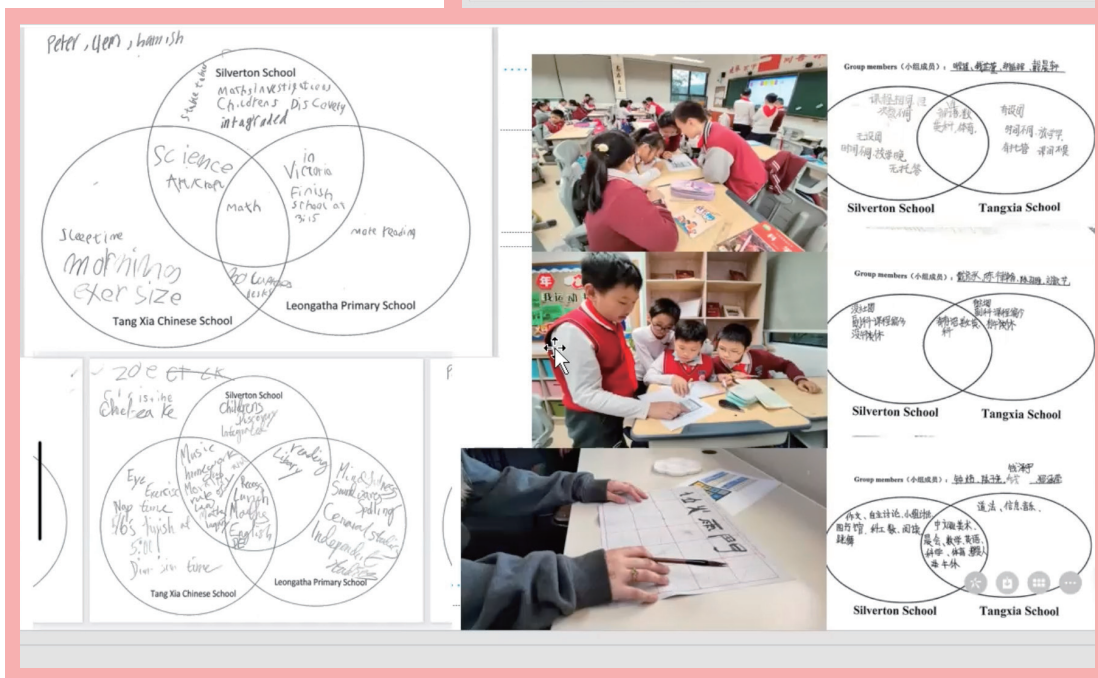
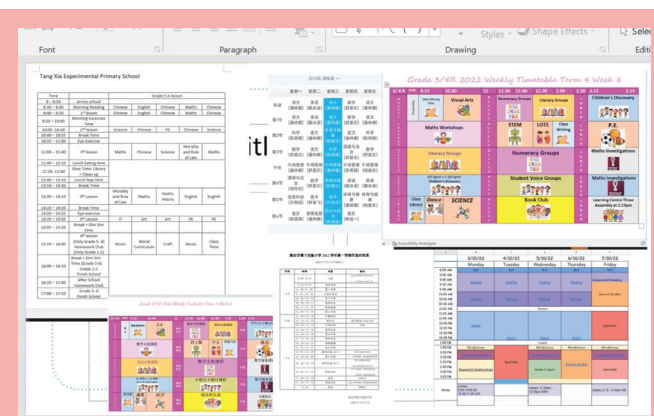
The collaborative project has proven to be beneficial for educators as well. In the process of designing and delivering the project, teachers were able to share their pedagogical beliefs and innovate their current educational practices. Ms. Tyme from Silvertown Primary School expressed,

*"We found that students in Chinese schools exercise in the morning or throughout the day, so we tried that in our school. It is really good to have a different perspective. We had fun learning about China and the school in China."*

Ms. Zhou from Leongatha Primary School added,

*"I was able to provide authentic learning experiences for my students. During Covid-19, we rarely had the chance to engage in face-to-face communication. Being part of this project can motivate students to learn and motivate me to engage in similar projects in the future."*<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Please note that unfortunately we were not able to interview teachers from Tangxia Experimental Primary School to contribute to this snapshot.



# SNAPSHOT 5

Hangzhou Tonglu Ye Qianyu Jianlan School and St Joseph's Catholic College (NSW)  
杭州桐庐县叶浅予建兰学校

The collaborative initiative between Hangzhou Tonglu Ye Qianyu Jianlan School and St Joseph's Catholic College focuses on promoting resilience among Years 7-12 students and includes frequent communications on social media platforms where they showcase and share their school experiences.

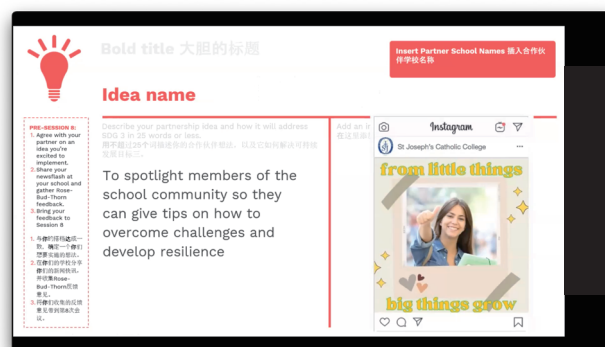
The idea of promoting student resilience stemmed from the recognition that both Chinese and Australian students face similar challenges, despite their cultural and social differences. The outbreak of COVID-19 has brought about unexpected stress and anxiety among students, necessitating teachers to be attentive and provide support to help students navigate and overcome potential hardships.

This resilience initiative has garnered significant attention at St Joseph's Catholic College, employing a whole-school approach to extend its impact. Ms. Kelaher explained,

*"We are trying to develop strategies involving teachers, students, and other members of the school community, such as parents, counselors, and other staff. Our aim is to reduce the levels of anxiety and stress students are experiencing."*

This initiative is expected to create an environment that supports students' wellbeing both inside and outside the classroom.

Simultaneously, the partnership aims to promote intercultural understanding and foster international connections among students. Students from Ye Qianyu Jianlan School are guided to capture interesting experiences from their school life and share them on social media platforms with their Australian counterparts. This practice integrates social activities with digital and intercultural communication skills, providing students with authentic learning experiences.



The Digital BRIDGE program has proven to be beneficial for the participating teachers. Ms. Zhang expressed,

*"Through this program, I have gained a deeper understanding of intercultural understanding and global competence, as well as how to establish communication channels between our school and the Australian school. We have explored the use of technology in partnership activities, teaching, and learning... It has been a wonderful and enriching experience."*

Similarly, Ms. Kelaher elaborated,

*"We strive to offer our students authentic insights into other cultures. I believe this program has assisted me in achieving that goal, enabling me to pass on that knowledge to my students."*

The success of the partnership between Ye Qianyu Jianlan School, and St Joseph's Catholic College is attributed to dedicated teachers who are committed to providing the best education for their students, supported by school leaders who continuously encourage and support their efforts.

# CONCLUSION

As the above case studies demonstrate, there are many positive outcomes and benefits of engaging digital school partnerships, emphasise the importance of incorporating such partnerships into educational practices to prepare students for an interconnected and globalized world.

The five key points below highlight the value of digital school partnerships in promoting intercultural learning, enhancing collaboration, and fostering global competence among students and teachers.

1. Collaborative projects that focus on **shared interests and common elements in curricula** create meaningful and engaging learning experiences for students. These projects promote intercultural understanding, foster friendships, and provide opportunities for students to develop important skills such as self-expression, appreciation for diversity, and cultural confidence.
2. The success of digital school partnerships lies in the **development of shared understandings, mutual respect, and collaboration** among partner teachers. Building strong interpersonal relationships and creating a warm and welcoming environment for collaboration are key factors in establishing sustainable connections.
3. Teachers benefit significantly from participating in digital school partnerships. The programs provide opportunities for **professional growth, international program planning abilities, and the enhancement of digital teaching skills**. Teachers can learn from and reflect on their pedagogical values, innovate their teaching practices, and become more empowered and professional in their roles.
4. Digital school partnerships go beyond academic performance and offer students a **broader worldview**. They expand students' horizons, foster empathy, and help them recognize similarities and differences across cultures. These partnerships equip students with soft skills required in a globalized world, such as intercultural competence, resilience, and the ability to navigate challenges.
5. The success of digital school partnerships depends on factors such as **open-mindedness, commitment, and understanding between partner schools**. By embracing new ideas, engaging in critical self-reflection, and designing collaborative projects that benefit all stakeholders, schools can establish long-lasting and mutually beneficial partnerships.

We hope that these key learnings from the Australia-China Digital BRIDGE program will be useful to educators to gain insights into effective strategies for implementing digital school partnerships and enhancing student outcomes in a virtual context, wherever in the world these may take place.



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