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Insights from SEAQ: Engaging with Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia Intelligence (SEAQ) is an online course developed and delivered by the RMIT Asia Hub, Asia Society Australia and RMIT Online as a pilot program and is supported by the ASEAN-Australia Centre.

The pilot cohort of 17 professionals completed the program in June 2026, drawing participants from across government, education, think tanks, professional services, business and technology.

Bal Bhullar, SEAQ's first Industry Mentor, reflects on what he observed across six weeks with the cohort.

What stood out most?

The depth of professional experience this cohort brought to the course. These were not early-career participants building general awareness of the region. Many of them had direct experience working in or alongside Southeast Asian government and industry contexts, and they brought that into every webinar discussion and Slack exchange. The conversations were genuinely analytical rather than introductory.

What surprised me was how quickly the cohort moved from understanding the region conceptually to interrogating their own organisations' assumptions and gaps. By mid-course, students were not just discussing Southeast Asia in the abstract. They were asking hard questions about whether their organisations had the patience, the relationships and the internal capability to actually engage at the level the region requires. That level of self-critical reflection was more immediate than I expected.

What makes SEAQ different from other programs?

“Most programs about Southeast Asia focus on what the region is. SEAQ is structured around what doing business there actually requires, and those are very different questions.”

The course moves from context to readiness to culture to partnership to risk to networks in a deliberately sequenced way. Each module builds on the last rather than treating topics in isolation.

The integration of practitioner voices, case studies drawn from real Australian experience, and the expectation that learners apply content to their own organisational context gives the course a practical weight that general trade education often lacks. The Invested 2040 framework runs through the course as a policy anchor, which also gives participants a shared reference point for thinking about Australia's strategic positioning in the region.



How do you see the learning translating into practical outcomes?

For this cohort, I think the most durable outcomes will be the ones that change how they prepare for and interpret interactions with Southeast Asian counterparts. The cultural intelligence framework, the understanding of face and hierarchy, the discipline around partner selection and due diligence: these are habits of mind that shift how professionals engage, not just what they know.

A number of participants identified concrete gaps in their organisations' Asia capability through one of the self-assessments in the course. Several have already reached out about specific projects and next steps. Whether that translates into sustained engagement will depend on the institutional support those individuals have when they return to their roles, but the intent is clearly there.

For Australia more broadly, having professionals at the government and policy interface develop this level of grounded understanding of the region is exactly what the Invested 2040 agenda needs behind it. Knowledge and relationships at the practitioner level is what gives strategy its traction.

About Bal Bhullar



Bal Bhullar is an international trade and investment professional with over 15 years of experience across the Asia-Pacific and the Americas. He has held senior roles in trade policy, investment facilitation, and economic diplomacy, including as Economic Counsellor at the Embassy of Brunei in Washington D.C. and as Senior Policy Advisor at the APEC Business Advisory Council Secretariat for Brunei.

Bal has deep expertise in Southeast Asian markets, regional trade frameworks including CPTPP and AANZFTA, and cross-border commercial engagement across ASEAN, Northeast Asia, and the Indo-Pacific. He is currently completing a Diploma of Customs Broking and is also an independent trade and investment consultant. Bal brings a practitioner's perspective to the SEAQ program, drawing on direct regional experience to help participants translate market knowledge into actionable business and policy strategies.

Applications for the second pilot course will open later this year in 2026.

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