MINING NEW SKILLS IN LAOS

WITH RMIT ENGINEERING
Headquartered in Melbourne, Minerals and Metals Group (MMG) has operations in three Australian states, including the Century mine in Queensland—Australia’s largest open pit zinc mine.

What brings RMIT University and MMG together is the company’s copper and gold operations at Sepon in south-eastern Laos.

In 2006, RMIT started training MMG LXML Sepon apprentices in a variety of trades—electrical, instrumentation, refrigeration and air-conditioning, carpentry, automotive, mechanical and fabrication.
SHARING THE BENEFIT OF TRAINING

MMG emphasises the importance of community development. MMG mines are not separate from their neighbouring communities. They are there for the long term and make a long term contribution to community development.

Employment is a key factor. There are about 1800 employees at Sepon, and approximately 2300 contractors. In 2010, Lao nationals comprised 90 per cent of the Sepon workforce—but it’s not just about jobs.

‘In the mining industry today it’s about jobs for skilled workers,’ says Brad Heath, MMG’s Superintendent of Training and Localisation at Sepon. ‘MMG LXML Sepon benefits from having a skilled local workforce. But there’s a bigger picture. Laos is a developing country, and building an advanced skills base means a lot for the country’s economic and social development.’

For RMIT’s trade teachers, there are benefits too. ‘You just become a better teacher when you work in a place like Sepon,’ believes Graeme Blair, RMIT’s Sepon Project Manager since 2008.

“You rethink old habits and find new ways to make sure that great learning happens. Our apprentices at Sepon have different cultural expectations about teachers and how to manage their own learning. You have to respond thoughtfully to those differences. You learn about yourself and reflect on how you teach, which ignites new enthusiasm for teaching generally.’

There is always a personal perspective to teaching. RMIT’s group of trainers has remained very stable since apprenticeship training in Sepon began in 2006. They relished their time with attentive, helpful, courteous students. They enjoyed social outings with them, and visited their villages. Most of all, as Graeme observed, ‘they wanted to finish what they started. They wanted to see their apprentices graduate.’
Several times a year, trade teachers travel to Sepon for teaching periods of four weeks. After flying from Melbourne to Bangkok, there’s another flight to catch—from Bangkok to Ubon Ratchathani in eastern Thailand, then onto Savannakhet on the Thai–Laos border by mini bus. From Savannakhet, it’s another mini bus ride to the mine. The ride to site covers most aspects of both Thai and Lao lifestyle, from cities and villages to rural countryside, jungles and valleys. The total mini bus trip from Ubon to Sepon can take up to 10 hours, including rest breaks and border crossing, and is also dependant on the weather and the current condition of the roads.

“You never get used to it, and you never get bored, because the trip is different every time,” says Graeme Barr. “It’s a privilege, really, to find that your teaching and trade skills are just as relevant in a very remote place like Sepon as they are in the centre of Melbourne.”

Sepon: located in the Savannakhet province of South-central Laos. Photo courtesy of MMG.

Australia is familiar with remote area mining operations, but getting to work in Sepon has particular challenges for RMIT’s trade teachers.
RMIT University has extensive experience and an enviable track record in international education and training. With more than 74,000 students, RMIT is Australia’s largest tertiary institution.

In 2001, the first campus of RMIT International University Vietnam opened to students in Ho Chi Minh City. The Hanoi campus opened in 2004. At RMIT Vietnam, as elsewhere in Asia, RMIT’s students are enrolled in disciplines as diverse as business information systems, multimedia and electrotechnology.

Stephen Connelly is RMIT’s Deputy Vice-Chancellor, International and Development. He observes that of RMIT’s 29,000 international students, nearly 18,000 study outside Australia. This remarkable profile extends from vocational education and training students, like those at Sepon, to undergraduate and postgraduate students in Hong Kong, Kuala Lumpur, Shanghai and Singapore.

‘RMIT has progressively established its expertise in working collaboratively and effectively with international partners in the corporate, government and education sectors,’ says Stephen, who is currently President of the International Education Association Australia.

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‘As a university of technology and design with global reach, RMIT is accustomed to forging strong links between training and work. Our teachers are alive to cultural differences. They know that training and assessment must be locally relevant to both students and their employers.’
A FOCUS ON QUALITY

RMIT’s onshore and offshore vocational education and training qualifications are equivalent. They meet the industry requirements expressed in accredited national training packages. RMIT’s training is quality assured through Australia’s national VET Quality Framework.

RMIT’s apprenticeship training at Sepon takes these formal, national arrangements as the backdrop for creating high-quality learning opportunities.

At Sepon, the language of instruction is English. RMIT worked with MMG LXMI, Sepon so that English language learning could be delivered concurrently with trades training. Our trainers worked with translators during formal classes to ensure our apprentices became more familiar with technical language, and to ensure expectations about student performance were understood.

MMG LXMI Sepon and RMIT expanded capability at Sepon by delivering accredited training in assessment to supervisors of apprentices. This means that assessment of trade competencies can occur on site, even when RMIT’s trainers are not at Sepon.

MMG LXMI Sepon required apprenticeship training across a range of trade areas. RMIT partnered with Box Hill Institute and Kangan Institute to optimise all areas of training. RMIT has managed delivery from those providers throughout the Sepon project, and ensured that their trainers are part of the RMIT team.

Photos courtesy of Graeme Barr
Brad Heath from MMG LXRL Sepon is in no doubt about the quality of training and other support provided by RMIT.

'It was great to have customised, up-to-date training. RMIT’s learning and assessment materials are consistently excellent,’ said Brad.

‘Graeme Barr and his team of trainers focussed on quality outcomes from the beginning. They got to work with electrotechnology apprentices who have no electricity in their villages or homes. They devised ways to introduce our apprentices to calculators and computers. They advised on capital purchases to support MMG’s training effort. The whole project was positive from start to finish.’
Please direct enquiries to
Global Business and Engagement
RMIT University
Tel: +61 3 9925 5110
Email: advantage@rmit.edu.au

Our Industry Engagement team will connect
you to the relevant academic staff and
professional services you require.

www.rmit.edu.au
RMIT University
GPO Box 2476
Melbourne VIC 3001