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IT without borders

The philanthropic work of both Doctors without Borders and Engineers without Borders is known worldwide. Now an RMIT University academic is working to highlight their Information Technology equivalent.

Dr Heiko Rudolph recently returned from Laos, where he worked with an NGO that equips disadvantaged young people with IT skills.

Those involved include landmine and polio victims, orphans, rural migrants and sex-trafficked women.

Digital Divide Data (DDD) opened its first office in neighbouring Cambodia 2001. The office in the Lao capital of Vientiane was established in 2003.

The organisation now employs about 300 people in the region. More than 180 young people have graduated with IT qualifications.

DDD was last month awarded a Skoll Award for Social Entrepreneurship, worth \$US1 million over three years. The Skoll Foundation was created in 1999 by eBay's first president, Jeff Skoll.

Dr Rudolph, a Lecturer in the [School of Electrical and Computer Engineering](#), said DDD aimed to help the poor and those with disabilities.

"Young people are taught computer skills and English and are given medical care while being trained for between three and eight months."

Dr Rudolph said DDD was 50 per cent self-sufficient, employing between 10 and 20 per cent of graduating trainees as data entry operators and scanning operators on data sent from overseas.



Disadvantaged young Lao people learn new skills with DDD.



"DDD has high-level US support, with access to clients like Ivy League universities," he said.

Dr Heiko Rudolph with Met Thippawong ("Little Mermaid") in Vientiane.

"The business turnover is \$US1 million, with funding and donations paying the rest.

"But DDD's real business is as an educator, with training very targeted to get good outcomes in employment."

The NGO's staff are well paid by local standards. Average monthly wages Laos are around \$US30. DDD pays up about \$US180 on top of health insurance and scholarships for education.

Dr Rudolph knows the region well, having been stationed there with AusA for three years.

"Laos is one of the poorest countries in east Asia, but it has suddenly turr a corner in terms of sophistication – they've woken up," he said.

In his four weeks he used his local contacts in Vientiane to work "as a fixer on zero commission", focusing on building DDD's profile in the NGO community and seeking new areas of support, particularly from the Nam Theum2 project and local expatriate businesses.

"DDD's managers didn't yet have some of the necessary connections with the international NGO and expat community. Those doors have been opened now."

Dr Rudolph is keen to encourage RMIT students to volunteer with DDD, which already has an excellent RMIT connection through the work and senior staff of [Engineers without Borders](#), Daniel Almagor and Stewart Davies.



Beyond the grand boulevards of the capital, Laos is still a desperately poor country.

EWB, which was founded in Australia in 2003 by [Mr Almagor](#), an RMIT alumnus, sends volunteers to carry out projects with DDD.

Now Dr Rudolph is investigating the possibility of sending students from t School of Electrical and Computer Engineering on work-experience placements with DDD.

"I would encourage students to take part. It's a matter of matching what you have to offer with what they need.

"It becomes a donation of time and hopefully you enjoy the challenges of in a different culture. It's not a great sacrifice!"

If you are interested in working with DDD, email heiko.rudolph@rmit.edu.au describing your skills and any overseas experience and attaching a short CV.

[Find out more about DDD.](#)

[Find out more about volunteering overseas.](#)

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