

Journal Comment

A Council for our Youth

Membership of the Southern African Institute of Mining and Metallurgy (SAIMM) includes mining and metallurgical students and new graduates from various universities and colleges in the southern African region.

Among these young people are those who have either authored or co-authored papers similar to the ones in this edition of the *Journal*, and the quality of these submissions leads me to believe that we are on the right track in terms of the academic part of the training that we provide in developing our future mining and metallurgical engineers.

However, these undergraduates also require vocational training, and after graduation, need an opportunity to develop their knowledge and experience sufficiently to be allowed to register as a professional engineer with ECSA. In this regard, we are failing to teach our youngsters properly.

Responsibilities around safety, health, and a duty of care for the environment while also regularly engaging with communities, demand much of the time and attention of our managers, who need to meet transformation and sustainable development targets as well as production targets. Yes, some mining companies are still sponsoring individual students or employing certain graduates as they enter the workplace, but the dearth of opportunities for our young people to develop themselves under the mentorship of experienced professionals and practitioners is huge.

After recently checking, I found that 42 years is now the average age of a SAIMM member who is also registered as a professional engineer. Should this number not be far lower if we are to effectively compete in a fast-changing mineral resource industry where much of the endowment of Southern Africa sits?

For me, this situation was somewhat expected. While working on the mines during the early 1990s I heard the comment, 'why train when it is probably more cost-effective to simply buy in the skills as and when needed?' This mindset coincided with a period when South Africa's large mining houses started unbundling, with the consequence that opportunities for young people to find pre- and postgraduate employment started to dwindle.

In August 2013, our students used a '*Career Development in the Minerals Industry*' event to remind us of their plight. Ironically, the main objective of the event was on 'mapping a career path', advising students on what to expect in their first five years of employment, and reassuring them that they would receive the necessary training in their chosen careers.

The students complained about uncertainty regarding career prospects in the mining industry, the need for on-the-job training for undergraduates with effective mentoring by suitable mentors, and the lack of experiential training opportunities on a mine for new graduates.

This forced Council to go back and question whether the Institute, as a technical society, actually meets the needs of all members, even those recently graduated or still at university. It was acknowledged that our younger members represent a different demographic – one on which the long-term success or failure of the Institute will eventually depend. This resulted in agreement on a need for a renewed focus on the 'youth' amongst our current and potential future mining and metallurgical engineers, and that by developing them from within the SAIMM, all of our youth within the industry would benefit.

A Career Guidance and Education Committee was formed some time ago by the SAIMM. It successfully encouraged new students to enter the mining industry by focusing on the building of a mining and metallurgy exhibition at the Sci-Bono Exhibition Centre and by attendance at various school science festivals in South Africa. It seemed logical to widen the focus of this committee to include the needs of our undergraduates. This plan did not succeed. There was very little support from industry, and it also became clear that our youth have a very different viewpoint to that of the majority of the members of the committee, and even Council, when it comes to debating the opportunities or threats to their future careers. We were trying to make decisions for younger people without knowing what their 'real' requirements were. At a meeting in July 2014 the question was raised whether we should rather be looking at how to enable our youth to help themselves.

Subsequent engagements with undergraduates and young postgraduates at various academic institutions

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resulted in overwhelming agreement on the merits of such an approach. So at the same time, volunteers were nominated from each of the institutions and on 12 September 2014 the SAIMM held a 'Workshop on Youth Development' at Sci-Bono to map out a way forward. The outcome exceeded all expectations, with the formation of a Young Professionals Council (YPC), under the umbrella of the SAIMM Council, to effectively replace the long-serving but outdated Career Guidance and Education Committee.

The YPC's main focus is to engage with the mining industry across the SADEC region to assist in finding support for younger members of the Institute. Some members of the previous committee have stayed on as observers to advise, guide, and assist wherever possible in this regard. The YPC is also well positioned to provide students with a better understanding of:

- The various career paths that a mining and metallurgy qualification affords them
- The training and registrations that they will require early on in their careers
- The personal development plans or initiatives that graduates can undertake to differentiate themselves in the marketplace.

The newly elected members of the YPC know that they can contribute significantly towards appropriate transformation, meaningful succession planning, and a solid portfolio of skills from the next generation.

Tshepo Mmola, Chairman of the YPC, talks of six focus areas covered with the help of three Working Groups (WGs):

- One WG for education to represent the interests of primarily pre-graduates in basic and higher education on matters of career guidance, academic development, and life skills
- The second WG for career guidance to represent the interests of primarily postgraduates in mining and metallurgy on matters of training, professional development, and life skills
- The third, or Enterprise, WG to concentrate on various industry initiatives to serve the interests of our young professionals

It is my hope that senior executives, mine managers, retired professionals, and entrepreneurs in the mining industry will support this initiative. I know that these young people can and, if they are helped, will positively impact the future of our industry.

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