

Has South Africa turned its back on apprenticeships?

According to Southern African Institute of Welding (SAIW) executive director John Tarboton, welders in the country seem to be a dime a dozen but highly skilled welders are not. Concerned about the number of fly-by-night training institutions that churn out graduates without the proper qualifications in place, Tarboton says this wastes students' hard-earned or even borrowed financing and sends out a generation of unqualified welders into the marketplace.



Source: Supplied

This results in situations like that found during the construction of the Medupi Power Station where 150 Taiwanese welders were employed for specialised welding work due to a lack of local skills. This is made worse within the context of South Africa's 34.9% unemployment rate, equating to 7.6 million people without work. However, even when welders seek out employment, SAIW has found during interviews that, anecdotally, only one in 10 will be sufficiently qualified for the job.

Need for suitably qualified and experienced trainers

Tarboton comments: "Unfortunately, this stems from the issue that training providers do not always understand the need for suitably qualified and experienced trainers within their institutions, who follow clearly outlined training guidelines in properly equipped facilities. In addition, certification bodies do not always understand the need for properly trained assessors with a proper understanding of Codes and Standards underwritten by objective assessments.

"As a result, what we are increasingly seeing is students who have already completed training at other institutions coming to us to gain the proper certified, government-recognised training after battling to find or keep employment due to a lack of skills.

He adds that this is especially worrying given the danger this poses to the quality of the installations or projects or products that they work on prior to achieving the appropriate level of skill. The training of welders needs to be given the respect it is due. Welding is an essential skill to manufacturing and fabrication in strategic sectors such as power generation, chemical processing and construction, transportation, food and beverage, and mining.



CHIETA programme helps retrenched workers find employment

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Light at the end of the training tunnel

Against this backdrop, and to solve South Africa's crisis of a lack of suitably qualified welders, the SAIW is seeking to partner with companies who want to produce artisan welders to the correct standard and with the necessary skill levels. This can take place via the government approved QCTO - Registered National Occupational Qualification (Welder) three-year apprenticeship scheme.

As an approved training body (ATB) under the IIW and a QCTO-accredited training institute, the SAIW is in a prime position to assist companies with the selection of candidates for its three-year apprenticeship training scheme, which offers both QCTO and IIW diplomas - the latter recognised in 60 countries.

The SAIW's training methodology utilises both theoretical indepth knowledge and practical real-world skills. "There is a reason our QCTO programme takes three years, not three weeks, as in many other institutions where training is rushed and based on the easiest methods of welding to ensure sufficient pass rates.

"We are not focused on ticking off a list of training modules as quickly as possible, with little regard to whether the required technique has been mastered and sufficiently practised. Our training culminates in a test based on objective criteria according to ISO 3834 standards where the actual quality of a weld, including its height and thickness, for example, is assessed - not just the act of having completed a weld."



Potential opportunity for women lies in artisan skills shortage

5 Aug 2021



Business benefits

The apprenticeship scheme is also not just a 'nice-to-have'. It has tangible commercial benefits for companies, including:

- Recruit and develop a highly-skilled workforce that helps grow their business,
- Improve productivity, profitability, and their bottom line,
- Create flexible training options that ensure staff develop the right skills,
- Minimise liability costs through appropriate training of workers, and
- SETA grants, SARS tax benefits and BBBEE scorecard points for skills development.

The apprenticeship scheme has also been proven to reduce training and recruitment costs. Once the training programme is complete, business's gain skilled employees who are trained to industry standards and familiar with a company's operations and culture. This provides a lower-risk, lower-cost style of recruitment and enhanced employee retention. To promote the use of this scheme, the SAIW is offering QCTO apprenticeship courses at its Johannesburg headquarters with the potential for a satellite school in the Highveld Industrial Park in Emalahleni and a second potential site in Middelburg, Mpumalanga in collaboration with the Department of Economic Development and Tourism.

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