

Media Release
Actuarial Society of South Africa
14 August 2018

Actuarial Society transformation intervention significantly ups black student pass rates

The majority of students enrolled in South Africa's undergraduate actuarial programmes are black. Yet the country has only 109 black African Fellow Actuaries. By comparison, there are 974 white Fellow Actuaries. A Fellow is a fully qualified actuary.

Mike McDougall, CEO of the Actuarial Society of South Africa (ASSA), says South Africa's actuarial profession faces a unique hurdle in speeding up transformation, namely the length of time it takes to qualify as an actuary after graduating from university.

He points out that it will take an Actuarial Science graduate another three to six years to become a Fellow. He adds that for the average black student the time it takes to qualify as a Fellow is likely to be even longer.

"These students come with a degree in Actuarial Science, which means they are highly intelligent. But they often face unique obstacles that impact on the time they take to complete the post-university part of the course."

McDougall says while there has been significant progress towards transforming student numbers, much more needs to be done to helping more black students on their journey towards becoming Fellows.

To this end, the Society created the ASSA Academy in 2016, which supports working student members in achieving their qualifications.

The ASSA Academy

The Academy provides educational support as well as soft skills training such as communicating in a corporate environment, balancing work and studying, and coping with the demands of the workplace. Students who apply themselves to their studies and their examinations are not charged for their Academy participation.

A demographic projection model developed last year by the ASSA Transformation Committee shows that by 2028 the Society's focused efforts are likely to result in a significant increase in the number of qualified Black African actuaries from the current 109 to 566. This would take the Society's broader Black membership (African, Coloured, Indian and Asian) of Fellows to 42%.

Improving the pass rate of students

Guiding the efforts of the ASSA Academy is healthcare actuary and President-Elect of ASSA, Lusani Mulaudzi.

In his role as Principal of the ASSA Academy Mulaudzi ensures that it meets the needs of black student members.

“Over the past two-and-a-half years we have already seen an improvement in the pass rate of students who have participated in the Academy programmes,” he says.

Mulaudzi says a good example of where the Academy’s interventions are making a noticeable difference is in the Communications subject for actuaries, which has proven a significant hurdle for many black student actuaries.

“An analysis of examination results indicated that black students struggle with the Communications subject, because English is a third or fourth language for many of them. This makes it difficult for these students to explain technical actuarial product information in layman’s terms, which is the key requirement of the Communications examination.”

In the Communications examination that preceded the Academy’s first intervention for this subject, the pass rate for black African students was 26% below the overall pass rate, and 45% below the pass rate obtained by white students.

Black African students in the Academy’s first group that attended the Communications programmes achieved a pass rate some 10% higher than the overall pass rate, and a mere 2% below that obtained by white students in the same examination.

Mulaudzi says this stellar result reflects both the value of the academy intervention and the commitment and dedication of the group of students.

He does, however, stress that the most important single ingredient for success remains the students continuing to apply themselves diligently to their studies and exam preparation. “No amount of intervention from the Academy can replace this, but the Academy can help students to develop tools for studying more effectively and provide a mentoring and peer support environment.”

The wide range of initiatives undertaken by the Academy with the help of many volunteers willing to contribute their time and expertise are benefitting some 200 student actuaries a year.

Included in these numbers are Refilwe Mashile and Oyama Mbaligontsi.

- **Refilwe Mashile**

Mashile moved from Soweto to Cape Town to study Actuarial Science at the University of Cape Town (UCT) and then started working as a student actuary in 2015.

An ambitious young lady, she had already attempted the dreaded Communications examination in her final year at UCT. She failed the examination and did not succeed in her second attempt either.

“I thought that maybe I am missing something and decided I needed all the help I could get. I enrolled for the Communications workshops offered by the Academy. We also did past papers and worked together in small groups.”

Mashile attempted the Communications examination again and passed.

“By tapping into the Academy resources, I realised that the problem was not with how I study and learn, but rather with my exam technique and logical structuring of answers. I started applying small, subtle changes to my exam technique and it has made all the difference.”

Equipped with new skills and confidence, Mashile has powered through all her examinations in just three-and-a-half years. All that stands between her and becoming one of the country’s youngest Fellows is the completion of an ASSA Normative Skills workshop and work-based learning documentation.

- **Oyama Mbaligontsi**

Mbaligontsi, from Port Shepstone in KZN, graduated three years ago from Wits University. “I have no problem studying and gaining knowledge. But I struggle with exam techniques like how to best answer the questions and getting the weightings right. I have all this knowledge in my head, but I struggle to formulate my answer. After many failed attempts I was feeling depressed and demotivated.”

Mbaligontsi says this changed when he decided to tap into every resource offered by the ASSA Academy. “I decided to take full advantage of everything to help me achieve my Fellowship.”

According to Mbaligontsi, the mentorship and guidance provided by the Academy’s volunteer lecturers, as well as the feedback provided on assignments have made all the difference. “I wrote Financial Economics and walked all over that exam,” he says with pride.

Ends

Note to editors: On completion of an Actuarial Science degree, a student is expected to demonstrate at least three years of work-based learning under the supervision of a mentor. During this time, the student is also expected to complete the ASSA professional examination requirements. In total, a student is required to pass 10 professional examinations as well as a professionalism and normative skills programme to become an Associate of the Actuarial Society and a further three subjects to become a Fellow. Strong performance in the undergraduate degree can exempt the student from some of the examinations.

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The Actuarial Society of South Africa is the professional organisation for actuaries and actuarial students in South Africa. The vision of the Actuarial Society is an actuarial profession of substance and stature, serving, and valued by, our communities as a primary source of authoritative advice and thought leadership in the understanding, modeling and management of financial and other measurable risks.