

# Grads' community involvement an upside during lockdown

DARREN PARKER | CREAMER MEDIA SENIOR WRITER

**F**or original-equipment manufacturer Weir Minerals Africa, a positive consequence of the Covid-19 lockdown last year was that graduates in the company's graduate programme were introduced to more community work than they otherwise would have been.

"It has become one of the highlights in terms of making it part of the core curriculum for the two-year programme. I think the youth of today wants to be more involved in the community aspect. We want it more ingrained in the programme going forward," says Weir Minerals Africa regional human resources director **Tshidi Anya**.

It is being considered as a compulsory component of the programme from this year on, in terms of the company's corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities, she adds.

"We don't operate in isolation. We are intrinsically linked to the communities in which we operate, and it is important for us to contribute to uplifting them."

Anya tells *Mining Weekly* that the lockdown provided the impetus for Weir Minerals Africa

to not only enhance its online development but also bring the graduates into the company's CSR initiatives. "Young people are increasingly interested in not only earning a salary but also doing their part to make the world around them better for all," she notes, adding that South Africa's transformation agenda goes beyond employment-equity quotas, broad-based black economic empowerment points and CSR expenditure.

Anya believes that "true transformation happens when individuals give of themselves personally", which is the aim of incorporating the CSR component into the graduate programme.

The programme provides participants with the opportunity to gain on-the-job training and experience to work on Weir Minerals' global suite of projects. They are selected through a

rigorous interview process to narrow down candidates recommended by universities and in-house applicants.

## Other Education Initiatives

Weir Minerals Africa also offers apprenticeships for technical trades whereby learners are afforded the opportunity to learn on the job and acquire a technical trade qualification.

The four-year apprenticeship programme includes theoretical and practical components.

Anya says that about 80% of both the graduate programme participants and apprentices are ultimately absorbed into the company as employees.

Weir Minerals Africa also has a bursary programme that funds university students in their second year of study. The bursaries cover tuition fees, accommodation, books and a monthly allowance. Bursary recipients are usually invited to become graduate programme participants once they graduate.

Anya says the bursaries are awarded based on academic performance in the first year of study and on recommendations made by allied engineering departments at key universities.

"These programmes serve to not only broaden the talent pool for our own organisation but also uplift the economy as a whole."

She says Weir Minerals Africa's education assistance programme – whereby the company pays for the primary and secondary school education of lower-income employees' children – further illustrates the company's commitment towards supporting South Africa's transformation agenda. ■

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## Pandemic highlights value of digital learning

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**T**he Covid-19 pandemic made all sectors realise just how powerful the online technology at our disposal truly is, says University of Pretoria (UP) project management associate Professor **Giel Bekker**.

"Platforms, such as Skype, Zoom, GoToMeeting and Microsoft Teams, were available, but the real value and power of these tools are being realised only now."

He says the lockdown forced tutors to convert training materials to be compatible with online formats in a very short time.

"For theoretical training, the conversion has been fairly easy, but there are many challenges regarding the practical modules. The introduction of gaming technology into training does assist in visualising some practical applications. The amount of training that can be done digitally, however, depends on the topic of training. For managerial studies, such as project management, about 75% can be taught online, he says.

For subjects involving laboratory and testing work, online training does have its limitations. In such cases, the online component can decrease to about 20%.

On the positive side, digital online training formats can ensure that modules and training programs are always available and accessible, and can be completed after hours or over weekends for shift workers.

Moreover, learning is self-paced, although Bekker feels that this can be a negative aspect as well, since some learners may lack the necessary motivation or drive to get through the training in a reasonable amount of time.

Bekker says the lack of face-to-face engagement diminishes the quality of the interaction between learner and educator, with group

discussions also dampened and limited.

He is also concerned about attendees becoming "lost" – a term he uses to describe attendees' logging into training, only to leave or do other work, thereby not fully engaging with the content. Another area of significant concern, particularly at remote sites, is a lack of stable Internet connectivity. Although South Africa's most pronounced constraint remains a technical one, with the countrywide roll-out of high-speed Internet still lagging behind other countries, he says South Africa is on par with the rest of the developed world from a teaching and content perspective.

"The role of UP is to ensure that training material is dated, accredited and presented to a high educational standard. So far, UP has been successful in achieving that, throughout the pandemic period," Bekker states.

To this end, UP is continuously updating its online technology, by introducing the Blackboard Collaborate platform during its lockdown last year to support learning and administration across the university. ■

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