

Skills development opportunities in SA

It is an accepted fact that skills development in SA is essential to the economic growth of almost all industries in the country and goes hand in hand with job creation. The diamond and jewellery industry is no exception.

Exploration for minerals and gemstones, mining them, cutting and polishing gems, manufacturing jewellery, identifying and grading diamonds and coloured gemstones, entering the finished products into the sales arena and making the final sale to the end consumer all require skills.

In some of the disciplines, a higher level of tertiary education is required for entry to universities which offer degrees in geology, mining and engineering, both civil and mechanical. However, there are also many opportunities available in the industry where the entry-level requirements are not onerous. This opens the doors for those wanting to up-skill as they continue working in their particular field, which will enable them to move in another direction within the industry.

Are there learning institutions in SA that offer courses and skills training which match those in other parts of the world? Yes, there are.

For those who wish to study geology to a degree level, the degree is offered by the University of Johannesburg, the University of Pretoria, the University of the Western Cape, the University of the Witwatersrand and the University of South Africa (Unisa).

The Universities of Pretoria, the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, Unisa and Mintek also offer degrees or courses for small-scale mining and beneficiation. South Africa has been at the forefront of mining for many decades and therefore vast experience is available to students, as is the practical application of their studies.

South Africa remains a major producer of diamonds in the world and there are a number of registered colleges that teach the skills required to evaluate rough stones and cut and polish them. The Harry Oppenheimer Training School and the Diamond Education Centre, both based in Johannesburg, and certain colleges teach the skills necessary for both disciplines and prepare students for entry to the industry. Zurel Bros SA, based in Polokwane, offers courses and leadership in the polishing of diamonds, while the Corlia Roberts Diamond Institute offers courses in rough diamond evaluation, grading weight recovery, cutting and polishing.

It goes without saying that with diamonds and other precious gems comes the manufacture of jewellery, whether in gold, platinum or other metals used today. Several institutions offer training in jewellery manufacture.

The Cape Peninsula University of Technology, the Durban University of Technology, the Tshwane University of Technology and the University of Johannesburg all offer degrees in jewellery design and manufacture. There are also a substantial number of FET colleges, or colleges registered by the MQA, which offer various levels of training and skills within the jewellery manufacturing environment. It is suggested that interested persons should Google FET and MQA- registered jewellery manufacture and design for a full list of providers.

The identification of polished diamonds and coloured gemstones, as well as laboratory-grown gems, and the actual grading of the gems for colour, clarity, polish and symmetry to international standards is another area that requires both theoretical and practical training. There are reputable gem grading laboratories in SA that issue reports detailing gems in all aspects and give all the information required for accurate pricing. However, this does not detract from the necessity for those involved in trading to be able to make an accurate assessment of the gem themselves, whether buying or selling.

There are also companies that offer short- to medium-term training in this field of expertise in SA. The GIA offers both theoretical online courses in diamonds and coloured stones and practical training in Johannesburg once a year.

Gem Training SA offers an in-depth online and correspondence course on diamonds and an introductory course on coloured gemstones. Bi-monthly practical training is offered that can be undertaken in a number of centres in the country. A course on diamonds specifically for retailers is also offered and can be tailored to suit students' specific needs. The Gem Lab, based in Cape Town, offers short courses covering diamond and coloured stone identification and grading, as well as jewellery valuation.

To sum up, SA has both the capability and the skilled and experienced personnel to train in the diamond and jewellery industry. What we really need now is for the industry and government to work together so that the resources and skills we have are put to good use and growth opportunities maximised.

