

Hundreds gather for first young water professionals conference in Africa



More than 350 people gathered in Pretoria, South Africa for the First Regional Conference of the Southern African Young Water Professionals (YWP) in January. Lani van Vuuren attended the event.

Organised by the Southern African Young Professionals Programme under the auspices of the International Water Association (IWA) and the Water Institute of Southern Africa (WISA), the conference was the first of its kind in Africa and the largest YWP conference to be held in the world to date.

Young water professionals from across the region and representing various spheres within the sector enthusiastically embraced the opportunity to network with both peers and prospective employers. According to Conference Chair and President of the SA YWP, Dr Jo Burgess, the large interest in the conference was mainly due to the huge amount of

passion among young southern African scientists and engineers to improve the region's water and sanitation services, render its development sustainable and protect its natural environment.

"Fulfilling the present and future needs of the water and wastewater industries require the continuous development of a workforce which is adequate in size, capable in skills and strong in leadership. Young professionals are the future of the sector yet there is no other body in the world that gives young water professionals a voice and a place to meet, either virtual or physical. The YWP programme is fully inclusive, with no agenda regarding gender, location, race or nationality. Any

and all individuals with an interest in any aspect of water, and especially those with a need to find a community of colleagues to belong to, are welcome."

The conference comes less than a year after the establishment of the South African YWP Programme. The first year of the programme focused on creating effective communication networks, including chapters in various provinces, to inform South African young water professionals. These activities culminated in the Southern African YWP conference.

The conference identified a great need for young water professionals in southern Africa to network. "It is daunting when

you are new in your career to suddenly be without the guidance of lecturers and supervisors, to be expected to be a fully functioning professional, when you have little experience behind you," notes Dr Burgess. The YWP Programme provides opportunities to join a formal mentoring programme and to meet with peers – two ways of reaching a sympathetic, advisory audience with whom young people in the sector can bounce around ideas and seek advice comfortably.

The conference offered young water professionals a valuable opportunity to present their work on a range of subjects, from water resource management, treatment and re-use to health-related aspects and basic water supply and sanitation. The abstracts were all thoroughly reviewed, resulting in presentations of exceptional quality. Experienced water professionals were also at hand to impart words of wisdom to the young crowd.

Awards were given to the Best Presentation and Best Poster. Joint winners Geoff du Toit of Aurecon and Olawale Olanrewaju of the University of the Witwatersrand snatched the WISA President's prize for Best Poster, while Dr Tobias (TG) Barnard won the Best Presentation Award. Dr Barnard, of the University of Johannesburg, will go on to present his work at the International YWP Conference to be held in Sydney, Australia, in July.

The southern African water sector has never been as exciting, or as challenging as it is today, said keynote speaker Gareth McConkey. "Young people are offered more opportunities than ever before, but they are also inheriting a myriad of problems while having to deal with future uncertainties, such as climate change." McConkey noted that water professionals today were taking on more responsibility at a younger age and he encouraged young people to seek out mentors and to learn from whichever sources they could find. He also noted that employers needed to do more to create enabling environments in which young employees could learn and develop.



Lani van Vuuren

Prof Anthony Turton of the University of the Free State said that it would be up to young water professionals to provide the heroic vision and leadership required to adequately address issues facing the sector. "Historically, the South African water sector, while being extremely sophisticated, has been very conservative. We drastically require new ways of thinking to solve our water problems – young water professionals will have to help the sector in that regard."

Today's southern African young water professionals have much to offer the world. "We have a vibrant generation of people committed to protecting public and environmental health, to considering all viewpoints when they tackle a problem, a willingness to collaborate and, above all, a tremendous amount of energy and enthusiasm," notes Dr Burgess.

The conference highlighted a number of challenges for young water professionals – not necessarily specific to any particular technology or topic, but rather focused on less tangible aspects. Chief among these were the need for better, cleaner, faster communication, especially between scientists/engineers/social scientists and the need to create a spirit of collegiality and pride in the sector. "Another oft-repeated request was for the sector to retain its older generations, whose decades of experience are crucial and whose wisdom is draining out of the sector," reports Dr Burgess.

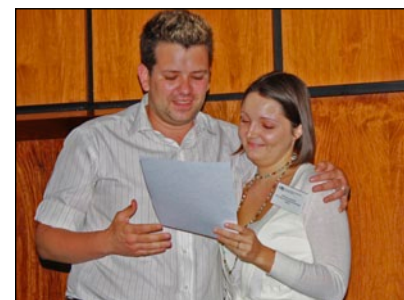
Despite these challenges, the conference vibrated with a high level of positive energy right up to the last session

Conference panellists Prof Brian O'Connell of the University of the Western Cape; Neil Macloud of Ethekwini Water & Sanitation and Prof Anthony Turton of the University of the Free State.



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Joint winners of the Best Posters Olawale Olanrewaju of the University of the Witwatersrand and Geoff du Toit of Aurecon.



Lani van Vuuren

Winner of the Best Paper Award Dr Tobias Barnard of the University of Johannesburg, with IWA YWP President Kati Ruzicka.

of the last day. "The conference was buzzing right up to the last moment – we had to chase people out of the auditorium once the conference was over!"

For more photographs of the conference, turn to page 34. 