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Local industry must find its niche in global aerospace sector

By: Lindsey Berry

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The National Aerospace Centre of Excellence (NACoE), an initiative launched and supported by the Department of Trade and Industry, is under way with a project to assess the skills requirements in the local aerospace industry with the intention of identifying skills required to enhance the global competitiveness of the local industry.

NACoE aerospace manufacturing and process materials director **Philip Haupt** says that the best way for the local industry to increase its global competitiveness is to identify and strengthen skills that the global aerospace industry needs. "The world has to tell us what they want us to do. It should not be us telling the world what we can do, as we have to fit in with global needs, which means that we need to develop relevant scarce skills," he adds.

NACoE director **Rudolph Louw** says that the collation of information on skills in the local industry is significant. He adds: "In South Africa, we have excellent skills in a number of areas, but they are spread over a range of specialisations. There has not yet been a successful coherent effort to channel those skills into an integrated solution."

Haupt says that, while South Africa has the advantage of having an abundance of raw material resources, there is an extensive value-adding process between the raw material extraction and the final aerospace component. He adds that, while the local industry should increase the availability of raw materials, it also needs to improve other process elements to become more effectively competitive.

The NACoE is in partnership with European commercial aeroplane manufacturer Airbus to sponsor South African students to carry out specific Airbus-related research as part of their studies. Managed locally by Stellenbosch University lecturer and NACoE aeronautics, dynamics modelling, simulation and control programme leader **Japie Engelbrecht**, the Flight Physics projects in collaboration with Airbus contribute significantly to the development of these scarce aerospace skills.

Louw says that this will provide the local industry with significant insight into the practical needs of aerospace original-equipment manufacturers, as well as providing South Africa with the opportunity to be involved in precompetitive research for the aerospace giant.

Human capital development is one of the primary mandates of the NACoE and the centre offers a number of bursaries to students who wish to follow careers in aerospace, thereby enhancing and developing South Africa's competitiveness in this sector.

Haupt explains that the NACoE is also looking to increase awareness of the career opportunities available in the aerospace industry to school children and undergraduate students, as many students are unaware of the range of skills used in the aerospace industry. "The industry uses more skills than just those acquired by aeronautical engineers and we need to increase the exposure to opportunities in this industry," he adds.

Initiatives, such as National Aviation Awareness Week, held at science development centre Sci-Bono Discovery Centre, are significant for increasing awareness of the industry. The event, aimed at teaching children about the aerospace industry, is held yearly and is run by Sci-Bono and the Joint Aviation Awareness Programme.

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