

Eskom's Lucy Sangweni shatters the glass ceiling

There is a perception that the professional engineering environment is a 'man's world' and that women in general are not attracted by technology. According to the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), in 1945 there were no women in engineering in South Africa. Sixty years later in 2005, the number of women in engineering was at a low 10.51%, highlighting the continued under-representation of women in the field.

The numbers would make any woman wanting to pursue a career in engineering think twice. For twenty-five year old Lucy Sangweni however, these statistics are merely research results and nothing more. To prove this, the young woman from Piet Retief, Mpumalanga, completed her Master's degree in Mechanical Engineering at the University of Stellenbosch in 2014.

While many would agree that for someone of her age, Sangweni is quite an overachiever, she simply sees herself as a young person following her dream. She is unequivocal in giving credit for her achievements so far to SciMathUs, a University of Stellenbosch bridging programme that is supported by the Eskom Development Foundation. SciMathUS, is an intensive, holistic year-long programme, which aims to afford students who have already written their final National Senior Certificate (NSC) examination, but did not meet the entry requirements for admission into higher education or selected programmes (such as engineering and medicine), the opportunity to improve their results in gateway subjects.

Sangweni had always wanted to study engineering but when she finished her matric in 2004, she was faced with two major stumbling blocks; her parents could not afford to pay for her to pursue her tertiary studies and her results fell short of the minimum entry requirements. This is why the SciMathUS programme was simply a "heaven-sent" opportunity for her. Even in the face of the stacked up odds blocking her future path, she didn't despair and when she heard about the programme, she knew her life was about to change.

Upon completion of her year-long programme, SciMathUS assisted her to secure a bursary for her degree, which she was awarded by the Department of Transport and Public Works. She completed her Bachelor's degree in Mechanical Engineering in 2010 before joining Eskom in 2011 as an engineer, responsible for designing power lines, a role she says she thoroughly enjoys.

"I was very fortunate to find this programme as I learned a lot through it – not just academically and it helped me grow and become a better person. I had never been exposed to computers before the programme and it also prepared me for what to expect by introducing me to some basic engineering courses. SciMathUS took care of my tuition, accommodation and living expenses and all I had to do was to focus on working hard in my studies," says Sangweni.

Over the years, more women have been studying engineering. However, the low number of women in the field is alarming, especially in the context of the country's shortage of engineering skills.

Haylene Liberty-Nel, the Eskom Development Foundation CEO says they are proud to make a difference in the communities that Eskom serves through such initiatives. The Foundation supports the programme by providing funding for students. In the last two years, the Foundation has provided financial assistance to 50 students per year by covering their tuition fees, accommodation as well as living expenses.

“Women like Lucy are an inspiration and their achievements will hopefully open doors for many more young women to enter the field of engineering. As Eskom, we are only proud to help them realise their dreams as we contribute to nation building,” adds Liberty-Nel. With the continued support of the Eskom Foundation, the University of Stellenbosch's SciMathUS programme will help facilitate the futures of many young professionals, especially Black females.

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