

## Presidential Address, November 2012

### Has the South African Statistical Association been successful?

Welcome to the 54<sup>th</sup> annual conference of the South African Statistical Association (SASA). Many a past president has stood before you with trepidation, some a calm exterior but nervous interior.

I am however a little more relaxed (at least on the exterior). The reason for this is that today I report on what I believe is good news. The 2011 Census results are been made public record, the American election race is reaching its climax and I will attempt to answer the question “Has the South African Statistical Association been successful”?

The good news is that I believe the answer to the question in my title is an affirmative, a qualified affirmative, but an affirmative. As I progress through this presentation, I hope I am able to convince even the most sceptic, of my opinion.

In 1999, Professor Linda Haines stood in the position I now find myself. In her address, Prof Haines posed several threats to statistics in South Africa. In 2003, then Minister of Finance, Trevor Manuel posed some challenges to SASA. A few years later, in 2006, Professor Francois van Graan identified a serious shortcoming within the statistics domain. More recently, in 2008 and 2010, Dr Khangelani Zuma and Ms Yoko Chhana respectively highlighted challenges faced by the South African statistics community. Today we review some of those challenges and highlight some of SASA's and the member's responses.

In 1999, Prof Haines identified the problem that SA was losing many young people who chose to complete post-graduate studies overseas and then never returned. There will always be the lure of international studies and travel, this is a reality experienced throughout the ages. There are still many who follow this route, however I am pleased to say that there are also those who choose to stay. Please excuse the photo's you are about to see, these images come from well used SASA newsletters.

A photo of Ian Durbach from UCT. This photo was published in the March 2002 newsletter. Ian is being congratulated as the winner of the annual SASA honours project competition. Ian has gone on to complete a PhD at UCT and is lecturing in the statistics department. The next photo is of Ms Inger Fabris-Rotelli (Plaskitt). This photo was published in the December 2007 newsletter. Inger is being congratulated as an honours project prize winner. Inger is in the final stages of her doctoral studies at UP and is lecturing in the statistics department.

This is an example of just two people that SASA and the respective sponsors have encouraged. There are other examples.

In 2003, then Minister of Finance, Trevor Manuel stated, “there are too few South Africans who love statistics or have a passion for it”.

Statistics is considered a “hard science”, an applied mathematics specialisation for people with mathematical inclinations. There is support for this belief, but as we review the students who have won prizes, been awarded bursaries or scholarships an interesting pattern emerges. There are several students who have furthered their studies and moved into academia or the South African corporate world. Examples of students who have followed an academic path include Wickes Robbertse (UJ), Jordache Ramjith (UKZN), Warren Brettenny (NMMU), Allan Clark (UCT) and Nothabo Ndebele (Wits). Here we see Wickus Robbertse (UJ) winning a third year SASA project prize (2001). Wickus won awards at third and fourth year level. A few years later Wickus will be the person to hand out a prize on behalf of SASA.

Students who have followed the corporate path include Heidi Maartens (Standard Bank), Trishanta Padayachee (MRC), Schalk Human (Nedbank), Clementine Machika (Local governance), Warrick Erlank (Element investment managers) and Nishay Vithal (Standard bank). This list of students who have received SASA awards indicates that there are “South Africans who love statistics or have a passion for it” and with continued support from SASA and the sponsors hopefully this list will continue to grow.

This picture appeared in the June 2005 newsletter. The picture is one of Schalk Human, an honours prize winner. Schalk has since gone on to complete his PhD and will be presenting a paper at this conference. If one is looking for evidence of passion, then we need look no further than Professor Delia North from UKZN. Delia has actively promoted statistics education both at university and school level. Delia’s work has been such that she was recognised for her efforts by the South African Academy for Science and Arts. Delia was awarded the Medal of Honour from the Academy, evidence that passion for the discipline clearly exists.

In 2006, Professor Francois van Graan highlighted the lack of research publications in the SASJ. Francois was concerned about the number of papers been published in the journal was decreasing, the fear that the journal was in serious decline. It gives me pleasure to report that the efforts of the last few years have been rewarded. The number of papers appearing in the SASJ this year is a record 16. The journal format is in the process of revision and with assistance from our conference invited guests, the visibility of the journal

should grow in stature. Francois, your concern were noted and the SASA community have made an effort to prevent the decline of the journals stature.

In 2008, Dr Khangelani Zuma stated that statisticians needed to be advocates for evidence based policies. This was part of the drive by former President, Thabo Mbeki, that evidence based decision making be used for government policy. If one takes the comments of Minister Trevor Manuel and Statistician General Pali Lehola into account. It is clear, that statisticians working for the national statistics office, Stats SA, are strong advocates of evidence based policies. The census just completed is a prime example of how statisticians have collected data, completed analysis and will now use this information to influence government policy. Khangelani, your call for evidence based decision making is been answered.

In 2010, Ms Yoko Chhana emphasised the case for a scarce skills allowance for statistics academics. The issue raised by Yoko is a genuine concern. Academic departments struggle to retain services of experienced staff. Several academic departments have raised this concern within their institutions. In some cases, the departments have been successful, a sign that University management are beginning to realise the importance of retaining their statistics staff. With continued efforts from within the institutions, this issue will receive more attention and hopefully all institutions will in due course consider a scarce skills allowance for statistics academics.

I have highlighted a few of the challenges raised in previous addresses. There is evidence that SASA and the SASA members are committed to addressing the challenges that we face. In fact, in most cases the results are positive. This brings me back to the title of the address, “Has the South African Statistical Association been successful?”. I say a qualified yes. We are moving in the right direction, there are positive results. These positives are a result of the collective efforts of many association members. The past Presidents who highlighted the challenges, the committees, sub-committees and members who addressed the challenges and perhaps most importantly the people who laid the foundation for the association.

The credit for the associations successes begins with, not this years executive committee, nor last years executive committee. Rather we need to go back further. We could go all the way back to when the association started 59 years ago. I hesitate to say that this was long before my time so in keeping with my limited institutional memory I take this opportunity to acknowledge those people I know who have worked tirelessly for the association, people like Professors Jacky Galpin (Wits), Tertius de Wet (US), Chris Smit (UP), Linda Haines (UKZN and UCT), Sarah Radloff (Rhodes), Niel le Roux (US), Jan and Cornelia

Swanepoel (UNW), Paul Fatti (Wits), Nico Crowther (UP), Daan de Waal (UFS), Dr Khangelani Zuma (HSRC). I have no doubt that I have omitted more names than I have included, one that springs to mind is our erstwhile colleague, Statistician General Pali Lehola, who is travelling the country spreading the word of the 2011 census results.

I complete this address with what I believe is important. The association and its members can take collective credit for work under taken by the statistics community. We have against the odds, broken away from the dull image of some of our fellow mathematical disciplines, we have faced several challenges, we have overcome these challenges, as an association we have been successful. I have little doubt, in years to come, more challenges will be made, and collectively we will overcome them. To paraphrase Rob Evans, a Harvard educationist, tonight we relax, pour a glass of wine, savour our successes, the “to do list” never clears.