

HOW A CA(SA) *training programme is* TRANSFORMING KZN'S PUBLIC SECTOR

Several years ago the KwaZulu-Natal Provincial Treasury (KZNPT) partnered with SAICA to help fund students via the Thuthuka Bursary Fund and begin the process of becoming an accredited SAICA training office. This was the start of an exciting and invaluable initiative to address the shortage of qualified CAs(SA) in the province and create opportunities for young people in one of the country's poorest regions.

In 2015, the department successfully obtained SAICA accreditation and became one of the first provincial treasuries to train future CAs(SA) in the public sector. The Trainee Accountant Programme (TAP) consists of three years of SAICA articles; once discharged, the beneficiaries are eligible to enter into a three-year management development programme (MDP) to develop leadership skills and improve their general employability.

'Our purpose was to have our own pool of qualified CAs(SA) to deploy to our departments, municipalities and public entities so that we can improve on our audit outcomes and strengthen financial management in the public sector, while also helping to continue to transform the profession,' says Madhavi Bhaw, Training Officer and Acting Deputy Director-General, Provincial Internal Audit, KZNPT.

Programme beneficiaries benefit from acquiring scarce skill sets in the areas of financial and fiscal management, financial accounting and reporting, risk management and internal auditing across the public sector sphere.

'This is vital for helping the province to build a capable, ethical and representative workforce, while also empowering vulnerable groups, as all the beneficiaries of the programme are young and most are women,' says Denicia Samuels, Director, Trainee Accountant Programme, KZNPT.

Since its inception, the programme has benefited 19 trainees from KwaZulu-Natal, with the department

receiving its first intake of trainees in 2016. The department has since produced 11 CAs(SA) who have been placed within various directorates under the MDP.

'We are building a committed, professional and competent group of financial management experts from disadvantaged backgrounds who understand the dynamics of the public sector and implement best practices across both provincial and local government,' Samuels adds. 'The programme provides a range and depth of exposure across the various elements, giving our trainees practical experience and hands-on understanding of how best to tackle issues and make the necessary recommendations and improvements within the provincial departments and public entities we work with.'

This has allowed Treasury to continue providing help and oversight to public entities as the province pursues positive audit outcomes – a total of eight departments, including the Premier's Office, recently attained clean audits, up from just two in 2019.

With the reprioritisation of funds following the impact of COVID-19, the programme has also succeeded in cutting costs by using trainees and post-trainees on projects and assignments, reducing the cost of external consultants while achieving historical wins in the province.

'We are honoured that KZNPT was the first training office in the country to onboard the SAICA electronic assessment system, making us fully aligned to the

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newly adopted CA2025 Competency Framework, which has placed a lot of emphasis on digital competencies,' says Bhaw. 'This means we can continue to improve professional behaviour and abilities in line with the requirements that will be demanded from future CAs(SA).'

KZNPT has had a delegate on the SAICA working committees since 2019 and has ensured that the public sector training space is always considered in the discussions and contributions. 'We have embraced the changes as it is exciting to see how the profession is growing and evolving, making sure that CAs(SA) remain relevant and actively reinforcing the role ethics, professional behaviours and good judgement play in fostering an improved business climate.'

Bhaw and Samuels are passionate about the programme and the potential it has to change young lives, while also making an impact on much-needed service delivery throughout the province. They are aiming to grow the programme so that they can deploy qualified accounting professionals into institutions where there are shortcomings. This is not to provide quick fixes, they agree, but to ensure sustained improvement.

'Our trainees will be future heads of institutions and finance teams,' Bhaw says. 'They understand the intricacies of public sector financial management, having had the practical experience of delivering with technical competence, and also with a high level of professionalism and integrity. Ultimately, KZNPT is building a foundation of ethical leadership which will begin to permeate the entire sector.'

AUTHOR

Monique Verduyn

REFLECTIONS FROM QUALIFIED FORMER TRAINEES

'Being part of the TAP programme has changed my life immensely. It gave me the opportunity to fulfil my childhood dream of becoming a CA(SA), the first in my family, and one of the few in my community. My success has encouraged many other young people to pursue their studies, both in the accounting field and in others. This is because, irrespective of an individual's background, it is evident that we can all achieve the goals we set for ourselves if we have the right resources and opportunities within our reach, such as the KZN Treasury TAP programme.' – **Thabile Dlamini**

'Joining the KZN Trainee Accountant Programme was the best decision I ever made, and I highly appreciate the opportunity I was given. Through the programme, I gained so much exposure that I was able to rotate through the entire department, where I performed many different tasks. Although there were challenges along the way, interesting ones, of course, I was able to grow as a person and I am better off today than I was when I joined. Through the programme I have been able to achieve my goal of becoming a CA(SA).' – **Thokozani Mpongase**

'The exposure trainees receive around key functions of the Treasury, such as public finance, assists them in identifying their areas of interest in the public sector. Moreover, trainees will be able to incorporate that knowledge when it comes to tackling tasks since they understand the Treasury and what it is seeking to accomplish.'

– **Minenhle Zulu**

'A trainee who completes this training will gain an all-round skill set which will enable them to take advantage of a range of career opportunities in the public sector since we focus on multiple areas of expertise during our training programme.'

– **Minenhle Zulu**

'The training programme provides exposure to key strategic areas of KZNPT. This allows you to adopt an integrated way of thinking and offer multi-disciplinary value-add, no matter which tasks you are assigned. These are the type of professionals that are needed in the public sector to drive economic growth and enhance service delivery through various initiatives such as process improvements, integrated solutions to problems and more, to reduce bottlenecks in government.'

When I entered the programme, I had little knowledge of what was happening in the public sector, and the programme gave me an opportunity to apply my technical skills in a different setting. The journey has been fulfilling as I realise how impactful professionals can be in ensuring service delivery to people and in executing the government's mandate. Moreover, the programme has grown me professionally and technically to be competent to work in any sphere of government, and for that, I will forever be grateful.' – **Siyabonga Dlamini**