



Name: Dr Stephan Ramabodu

Start: 2014

Title: Senior vice-president of the Association of South African Quantity Surveyors

Primary role: Ramabodu is driving the importance of the quantity surveying profession in both public and private sector projects.

QS in the blood

Dr Stephan Ramabodu is on a mission to bolster the role of the quantity surveyor in the infrastructure delivery supply chain, *The Civil Engineering Contractor* learns.

Q: What inspired you to become a quantity surveyor, considering that there seems to be some ignorance about the profession?

I never dreamt of becoming a quantity surveyor, because I did not know what quantity surveying was. I wanted to become a medical doctor. I applied to different universities, but eventually enrolled for a B.Sc (Information Science). While studying at University of the Free State, I used to walk to campus past a construction site where my late uncle used to work. Now and then I would ask him for some money for food or transport. One day he said he would like me to meet one of the "smartest guys on site" – a quantity surveyor. It was the first time I had heard about quantity surveying. That made me curious and I started reading about the profession and doing enquiries.

Q: How did you manage to travel the path from a previously disadvantaged background to where you are now with your own QS business and also lecturing at the University of the Free State?

It was a very difficult road, but I had a plan in life and decided to stick with it. That plan was very simple: no matter what – with or without money – I had to finish my studies. This quest started while in Grade 10 at school, when I would look for gardening work. I found some where my mother used to work. I would do gardening every school break until I had finished my matric. Luckily, my mother's boss, Prof Bennie Viljoen, was a lecturer at the University of the Free State. He once said to me if I passed my matric, he would give me a bursary but then I must study B.Sc (Food Science). My mother was very excited about the idea, but the problem was I wanted to become a doctor. When I passed my matric, I was accepted at the University of the Free State to do any generic B.Sc course before I could apply for medicine, due to insufficient points for medical studies. I asked everywhere for money from relatives but had no luck.

I then went back to Viljoen and he said he would lend me the registration money but I would have to work for it and repay him. I had to paint his office and from the money he paid me, I managed to get to university.

It was while I was doing B.Sc (Information Science) that I found out about quantity surveying and I then called on Prof Basie Verster, who was head of the department at that time. He looked at my record and said I must fill in a form for admission in the following year. I think if my memory still serves me well, I started studying quantity surveying in 1998. In February that year, I saw an advertisement on one of the university's notice boards, from BL Bloemfontein, which was looking for a quantity surveying student. I applied and got the job there, working for Anthony Porter.

Q: So there are particular individuals who inspired and assisted you in your career progression? What roles did they play?

Yes, Porter, for one, gave me a lifeline. With his help, I was able to apply for a study loan. He gave me a letter for the bank, confirming that I was employed at his company. On weekends, I would sell hot dogs for extra money to buy food, clothes and transport. My salary paid for university study material. After I completed my university studies, I received several job offers from different companies. But again Prof Basie offered me work: a position as junior lecturer in his department at the university.

Q: Tell me more about your first employment as a QS, your subsequent career, and what are your current positions at the university and in private practice.

I was first appointed as a student quantity surveyor and through that became familiar with the professional environment. After graduation, I was appointed as a junior lecturer and did private work for contractors or quantity surveying firms to gain further experience. In 2006, I joined the then Davis Langdon as a director

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and in 2008, I started my own business called Ramabodu & Associates, and was also re-appointed at the University of the Free State as a lecturer. I completed a Master’s degree in 2005. Furthermore, I did a PhD, which I completed in 2014. Thereafter I was promoted to a senior lecturer position at the university, and was also nominated as vice president of the Association of South African Quantity Surveyors (ASAQS), fees chairman of ASAQS, and most recently appointed as editorial board chairperson of *Acta Structilia*, a national journal for research articles in the physical and development sciences, published by the University of the Free State’s Department of Quantity Surveying and Construction Management.

Q: As tutor to future QS professionals, what is the message you particularly try to convey to these young people at university?

The past should never dictate your future. Your past must be used as your building blocks. You, as a young person, must build the future you want by getting close to the right people – and always be willing to learn.

Q: Is the pace of transformation an inhibiting factor for young aspirant QS practitioners? And are you concerned that schools are perhaps not adequately preparing students for tertiary studies for a profession such as yours?

Yes, these are my concerns. We should be willing to work hand in hand in transforming not only the economy, but the education system and the mindset and beliefs. By working together, South Africa would become a better place for all. I am not sure why, but the quality of the learners has gone down. This could be the result of many factors, such as teacher-training system, or minimum pass marks.

Q: How can tertiary institutions help QS students cope with the challenges of the new age they will be operating in?

I think tertiary institutions should provide more support in terms of technology, aspects like studio-based learning and vocational work. But private companies must assist as well, although I realise it’s difficult under the current economic conditions. More bursaries should be made available if the QS profession wants to attract the best in the business.

Q: Is the QS profession doing enough to monitor the full supply chain when it comes to sustainability? And just how difficult will it be to improve the “green” qualities of what could be an expansive supply chain?

At this point in time, I don’t think the QS fraternity is doing enough in terms of supply chain issues, particularly in government contracts. Quantity surveying is supposed to be the specialist in procurement but I believe most of the QS input has been taken away for some strange reason.

Q: What, in your opinion, are the most important aspects of sustainable building your profession will have to concentrate on in future? Would aspects such as feasibility studies, life cycle costing, and management of the entire construction budget now all play a major role?

All these concepts have always been important in the cost management of any project.

I believe green building is a fast growing phenomenon and QS professionals must start doing research in these fields and develop systems that will help them prepare for future demands.

Q: ASAQS has just staged its first national seminar. How important is it for the profession to be united and improve networking in future? And how important do you regard the role of ASAQS in promoting the profession? Do enough young people at schools know about the profession as a future career?

The seminar was very successful and it’s very important for professional development. The role of ASAQS is very important but it is time that ASAQS became visible to everyone, clients, general public, schools, everywhere.

Q: And, finally, if you were leading ASAQS, what would your main aspiration be for the profession and association?

They would include:

- transformation, including gender equality issues,
- marketing,
- research, and
- serving our members. ■■