

## Upholstery qualification is vital in the employability of artisans

The South African Furniture Initiative (SAFI), in partnership with the Fibre Processing and Manufacturing SETA (FP&M SETA), completed the pilot phase of the updated Occupational Certificate for a Furniture Upholsterer in Johannesburg.

According to Bernadette Isaacs, Managing Director of SAFI, the pilot proved to be a success with the learners taking part in practical training and examinations to allow the National Artisan Moderation Body (NAMB) to quality assure the updated trade test documents including mark sheets, ARLP (Artisan Recognition of Prior Learning) toolkit and accreditation check list. “Upholstery is identified as a scarce skill by the furniture sub-sector, where the skill is to upholster items by fitting suspension and padding, thereby covering a frame to give it shape, comfort and functionality for a range of domestic, commercial and decorative uses,” explains Isaacs.

“For SAFI it is vital to be involved in all furniture sub-sectors to partner, develop and support the furniture manufacturing industry,” says Isaacs. “As the project management team for the update of the Upholstery Qualification, we are playing an important role in developing a scarce skill, ensuring its sustainable contribution to providing locally manufactured goods, in line with domestic and government’s plans and needs.”

According to Naiem Bassadien, a Senior Technical Facilitator at the national vocational skills provider Furntech, being a key contributor to the qualification assists in ensuring it speaks to the present and future needs of the industry. “Since the average age of an upholsterer is 55, investing in this artisan qualification is paramount to the skills development area of the country,” he said. “It is a skill that favours both men and women equally, is a highly employable skill and will always be in demand, even within the 4<sup>th</sup> Industrial Revolution.”

Aubrey Bowers, owner of the Bowers Upholstery School of Excellence, agrees with these sentiments when he emphasises the importance of uplifting upholsterers to improve their skills, livelihood and earning potential. “During the pilot phase we were able to identify the products that could be used in the recognition of prior learning, as well as complete the necessary questionnaires and marksheets,” he said. “Although learners who formed part of the pilot phase made every effort to achieve quality and timeous completion of their projects, the skills in upholstery processes are lacking, which emphasised the urgent need for upskilling.”

The pilot phase was also deemed a success by Bassadien as it allowed the testing and development of the material, identifying shortcomings and needs, as well as assisting in identifying the timeframes and the application of the course material.

According to both Bassadien and Bowers, the improvement in the quality standards is imperative, while better processes and more time to be exposed to the practical part of the qualification are needed, especially since most learners have not done any upholstery before.

On completion of the course, the learner is able to upholster and manufacture certain elements in the furniture value chain. Apart from entering into a career in upholstery, the industry-based training enables learners to start their own businesses as entrepreneurs as well. By learning about fabric, materials used, techniques and how to upholster, for example, a Wingback chair, the learners get an opportunity to practically showcase what they have learned. These skills include applying health and safety to a work area, complying with good housekeeping practices, reading and interpreting basic engineering drawings, covering a prepared frame using basic upholstery hand tools, preparing and performing the pre-covering upholstery process, as well as preparing the final covering for prepared upholstery frames.

The Furniture Manufacturing sub-sector is made up of employers in the upholstery, bedding and curtaining industries, in addition to the timber industry, with companies that manufacture wood furniture dominating the sector. The Qualification is registered with the South African Quality Assurance Framework (SAQA) as an NQF Level 04 and the development of the qualification was funded by the Fibre Processing and Manufacturing SETA (FP&M SETA).

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