Air traffic control - an alternative career option for matriculants

Matriculants can enter the world of air traffic control if they have a Level 4 pass in both Maths and English by attending the Aviation Training Academy (ATA).

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Thandeka Mxakaza always wanted a career in aviation, flying planes preferably, but because she could not afford pilot's training, enrolled for a B.Com degree at the University of the Free State. "I always thought it was impossible being a pilot or a flight attendant but through Facebook, I became aware that there were other options, among them air traffic control. I also learned that I could apply for a bursary to do air traffic control through the ATA."

Mxakaza, with her B.Com degree, is one of nine women in the current intake of 27 school-leavers who began training at the Academy in January.

ATA Principal Tendani Ndou, says, "For many matriculants, university study seems to offer the gateway to a good career. However, as the recent #FeesMustFall campaign demonstrates, this can be the hard option for many, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Matriculants should look more deeply at their options.

"We offer matriculants the opportunity to gain world-class accreditation in air traffic control. It is a highly specialised discipline experiencing a skills shortage and aviation is a growing industry that is vital to both tourism and international trade. This combination means good job prospects and a stable career path in an exciting sector.

"It is a rigorous training programme but it is vital to ensure that graduates have the right skills to ensure the safety of air passengers and crews in South Africa's increasingly busy skies. You cannot compromise on training," concludes Tendani.

Encouraging women to enter

ATNS human capital executive Thandi Thankge says that the organisation is focused both on creating a pipeline of talented young South Africans to enter the industry, as well as playing a role in helping to build the country's skills and provide opportunities for people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

"We particularly want to make matriculants in the rural areas aware of the potential for building a fulfilling career in aviation. We also want to inspire young women to enter what has always been seen as a male-dominated industry. Our current intake of 27 matriculants is one-third female, but we would like to improve that balance."

The selection process is tough, warns Thankge, something that Mxakaza verifies. Matriculants must have at least a Level 4 pass in both Maths and English and undergo rigorous psychometric and medical testing, along with conventional interviews.

"Air traffic controllers hold the lives of many in their hands, so we have to be sure we are getting the right people, both in terms of skills and personality. For example, around 80 applied for this round, but only 27 made it," Thankge adds.

Once Mxakaza and her fellow students have completed a four-week aviation awareness course, they will start on the core content (Introduction to Air Traffic Management) module for just over three months. Then they will be assessed for entry into the Air Transport Controller Assistant course, which will include on-the-job experience. They will then choose between working in an area control centre, which is a hub that is used to control aircraft across the airspace - between two points; or approach control, which deals with guiding the aircraft during landing and take-off or tower control, which involves ground control of aircraft.

For now, Mxakaza says she is focused on her course. "The Academy has everything one needs, including the opportunity to meet new people and learn new skills. It is a great way to learn about the industry and maybe one day I will be able to train as a pilot. Now that I am here, though, I realise how little people know about what aviation has to offer, especially us girls. I would definitely like to play a part in helping to raise awareness about aviation."