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High hopes for simulator pilot project

Skills shortages in the mining and agriculture industries are being tackled with a number of pilot projects underway in the upper Spencer Gulf region of South Australia.

JUST ONE of the projects involves an \$800,000 mining truck simulator developed by Immersive Technologies p/l of Perth. It's in use at TAFE SA's Port Augusta campus on loan from Oxiana's mining contractor Thiess and the Resources and Engineering Skills Alliance (RESA).

RESA project coordinator Tim Wilson, a long-time Port Augusta resident, is happy to see a local industry member (Thiess) taking an innovative and proactive view towards the state's looming skills and labour challenges.

Housed in a shipping container for portability and on campus since last November, the simulator is a peripheral video environment with real-life animation able to simulate driving conditions and emergency situations including engine fires and tyre blowouts. Detailed reports are generated for operator assessment and benchmarking.

Simulated mayhem

Of Tim's attempt at driving the simulator, configured as a Caterpillar 793D dump truck, he says: "I crashed it within 60 seconds. I blew up the gearbox and slid down a hill. I decided at this point to stick to project coordination."

Another project being facilitated by RESA is the Australian Regional and Mining Skills (ARAMS) project. This is an initiative of the National Farmers Federation and the Mineral Skills Council of Australia.

The upper Spencer Gulf pilot is the first to explore a collaborative approach with mining and agriculture sectors "working together to grow the pool of skilled labour and develop regional and rural Australia".

Tim Wilson reports that the ARAMS project has a steering committee that oversees strategies decided upon by several focus groups and the development of other strategies as actioned by the committee. Much progress has been made to date with the pace gaining its own forward momentum.

"If in Port Pirie it might be a job-share agreement where a husband and wife would work together in sharing duties," he says. "I have asked the focus groups to be creative and have fun with the processes."

Marketing and education tool

RESA is keen for the simulator to be used as a marketing and education tool for the mining industry, the programs able to give year 11 and 12 students a taste of what opportunities await them in the mining sector.

"Many people have made enquiries about the simulator and it is expected that school-leavers, local related industry groups and members of our indigenous community will all have valuable exposure to the simulator."

Port Augusta TAFE, meanwhile, has put the learning tool to good use. Five indige-

nous students completed a 10-day course organised by a local job seeker agency. They learned skills in earthmoving and were assessed by TAFE lecturers.

Although the simulator was never intended to be used as a recruitment tool, two now have jobs in a related field. Another group of 10 from a declared exceptional circumstances area was put through the same program and three have also been elected for employment through their local job network provider. Both courses included site-based practical training at Prominent Hill.

Cost effective training

A Thiess in-house publication says: "With mining equipment costing \$3m per truck and a damaged tyre costing up to \$50,000 the training simulator is a cost-effective way to train people without slowing down mining activities."

Tim Wilson says there are up to 1500 agriculturists in hard circumstances in SA who are looking for answers. He's hopeful the simulator and ARAMS pilot projects will address their concerns and be a template for action in the rest of the state, and possibly across borders.

Immersive Technologies vice-president Asia Pacific and Africa Paul Davis says training organisations are finding simulation a more efficient approach to dealing with operator shortages. "We are proud to be involved in addressing skills shortages through the use of our simulators, delivering training solutions into 23 countries around the globe," he adds. □

More information: Tim.Wilson@resa.org.au.

(left) A Cat 793D simulated model in a custom mine site virtual environment. (below) An Immersive Technologies advanced equipment simulator with a Caterpillar 793 haul truck training module. Simulator images courtesy Immersive Technologies p/l.

