

# Looking ahead to bright futures

A Young Water Professionals sector report.

**M**ichaela Aspell is a young engineer looking forward to a bright future. This year she was the first winner of the Water New Zealand Young Professionals award – a new award aimed at giving one young water professional the opportunity to attend this year’s Water New Zealand Conference in Rotorua.

In her 22 months as a civil engineer for Tonkin & Taylor, she’s already worked on the largest dredging project in New Zealand – the Lyttleton Port Company Channel Deepening project.

For Michaela, her long-term aspirations are centred on the provision of environmentally sustainable safe water. Like many young engineers, she’s got a global outlook.

Young engineers like Michaela face a very different future than that of their predecessors. Issues such as climate change and financial constraints will increasingly underpin the way they operate. It’s an environment that will require very different solutions – many of which will have less to do with building and infrastructure, and more to do with information and digital technology.

It’s not surprising that at this year’s Water New Zealand Conference, the Young Water Professionals’ sessions were amongst the most popular, with dozens of young engineers now keen to belong to what’s becoming an important networking group.



Michaela Aspell.

The Young Water Professionals Group has three chapters, Auckland chaired by Matt Ewen, Wellington chaired by Fiona Myles and Christchurch chaired by Richard Gramstrup. Each chapter meets regularly to work on actions that assist in promoting the sector to people looking to start their careers. Regular events are also held with upcoming events in Auckland, Christchurch, and Wellington at the time of writing.

The Young Water Professionals Group is still in its infancy, yet the chair of the Canterbury branch, Richard Gramstrup says around 30 to 40 young engineers attend most of the events, which include anything from social quiz nights to presentations.

Providing networking opportunities for young people and support and information for undergraduates thinking of going into the water sector are key goals of the group.

“We want to make sure that student engineers know about us and the opportunities that are available in the water sector.

“There’s going to be a lot of work and opportunity in this area over the next 10 years as we seek new solutions to replace and update our aging infrastructure,” he says.

“We’re going to need many more skilled people and we

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need to make sure students are aware of the attraction and benefits.”

Richard says the water sector has suffered from a low profile compared to other sectors such as construction and that’s why there hasn’t traditionally been the same interest amongst students.

“Unlike a new bridge that people can see, no one really knows about water reticulation unless it’s broken.”

He says the recent Canterbury earthquakes have made people realise the importance of potable water in that region.

“Christchurch people now know just how critical water reticulation is.”

As well as an aging infrastructure, the water sector is facing an aging workforce.

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This will leave many of the younger engineers in the driving seat and that’s why networking, not only with other young professionals, but also tapping in to the knowledge of senior colleagues has become another key focus.

“We need that skill set and knowledge transferred to young professionals and tradespeople before we get a mass exodus of seniors from the industry. These are the guys that built the infrastructure that we’ll inherit. They know how it works.”

All this points to some very good reasons why this group has an important role to play, not only in supporting the long-term aspirations for young engineers, but in the sector as a whole. And this is a message that needs to get out.

“There’s a lot of understanding about what belonging to the IPENZ can do for networking and professional opportunities but much less so about belonging to Water New Zealand.”

For students, membership is free. As well as opportunities to meet with like-minded colleagues and find out more about what’s going on in the water sector, membership also provides access to technical papers.

This, says Richard, provides a valuable resource for students as well as those starting out in a new job.

“I would have liked to have had access to some of those papers when I was a student. I didn’t even know they existed, but they would have been very helpful as reference material.”

Along with new challenges of making the most of the digital age, the increasingly global environment that inspires young water engineers like Michaela is becoming another focus for the Young Water Professionals Group.

“The global outlook is strong, and that’s why we’re working hard on establishing global links, most recently with Young Water Professionals in the UK.”

In an environment where knowledge and personal contact is becoming increasingly important, both here and overseas, the YWP is providing an important support base and link for engineers starting out or in the early stages of their career.

If you would like more information about YWP events and how to join, go to the Water New Zealand website [www.waternz.org.nz/YoungWaterProfessionals](http://www.waternz.org.nz/YoungWaterProfessionals). **WNZ**