

SOUTH AFRICAN COUNCIL FOR AUTOMATION AND COMPUTATION

REPORT OF THE PRESIDENT FOR 2007

2007 has been one of the most momentous years since SACAC was founded in 1961. SACAC was formed to serve as the National Member Organisation for the International Federation of Automatic Control, and it has been a long-held ambition of SACAC to host an IFAC World Congress. It is an aim we have been patiently working towards for many years; our friendship evenings at world congresses have become renowned for their hospitality, not least due to generous sponsorship from the South African tourism and wine industries. We made a firm bid to host the 2011 congress but were turned down at the first round of the selection process. Undaunted, we again submitted a bid in 2006, this time to host the 2014 World Congress in Cape Town. From the original seven bids, the IFAC Council shortlisted South Africa and the United Kingdom to prepare detailed submissions for consideration at their meeting in Toulouse, France, in June 2007. We received professional and enthusiastic support from the Cape Town International Convention Centre and Routes Unlimited, the Western Cape's tourism promotion body, and they helped us put the bid document and presentation together; we owe them a great deal since, although much of the material was part of their normal stock, they were very happy to tailor the bid contents and layout to meet our requirements as a learned society. Ian Craig, Les Lange, Tshilidzi Marwala and I travelled to Toulouse to make the presentation, ably supported by Ian's wife Andrie and my wife Maureen as well as Ian's student Loutjie Coetzee, who coped with the technical foibles of a strange projector for us. The actual proceedings were over in a short space of time, 20 minutes for each bid, time for a few questions and then we were sent outside to wait while the Council deliberated. I'm pleased to say that the vote went in our favour and SACAC will be hosting the 19th IFAC World Congress in Cape Town in August, 2014. A corollary to the congress decision is that our very own Ian Craig has been nominated to serve as IFAC President for the period 2011-2014; it is a great honour for him personally and we congratulate him on this recognition of his international academic standing. The tourism people tell us that attendance always increases when an event is held in Cape Town, so we can look forward to a potential 3 000-plus delegates in 2014.

We had very little time for celebration before the next major event was upon us, the IFAC Symposium on Non-linear Control Systems ("NOLCOS"), held in Pretoria in August. NOLCOS is one of IFAC's largest events, after the World Congress, and we were able to attract an attendance of over 200 people, some 150 of whom were from countries outside of Southern Africa. I understand that the event went very well, and also generated a positive income for SACAC, and I would like to thank Fernando Camisani and Xiaohua Xia in particular for their hard work in organising it for us.

I was unfortunately unable to be present at NOLCOS since I was attending the next-largest event on the IFAC calendar, the Symposium on Automation in Mining, Metals and Mineral Processing ("MMM"), which was being held in Quebec, Canada at the same time. SACAC has secured the MMM event for 2010; it is our intention to hold it in Cape Town as something of a practice run for the World Congress, although it is, of course, a much smaller event with only about 120 participants. I was able to give the delegates in Quebec a brief presentation about both Cape Town and our plans for the World Congress and we look forward to welcoming many of them here in 2010. Your new SACAC executive will be starting work in earnest on the organisation of MMM 2010 during this coming year.

Amidst all the excitement, we did also manage to arrange some “home” events for you, our loyal members. Our AGM was held in this same venue in January, an early start for the season since both Jon Tapson, my predecessor as President, and Ian Craig were proceeding overseas on sabbatical assignments. The accounts were not yet audited at that date but I can confirm that your executive committee did consider and approve the auditor’s report at a meeting later in the year. John Viljoen organised a workshop on Energy Efficiency and Advanced Control in February, prophetic given the current electricity supply shortages that we are now experiencing. Steve Venter and his team at Siemens took the lead in arranging a morning session on Integration of Control and ERP Systems in parallel with the instrumentation show at Nasrec in April. Later in the year, when we had had time to recover from NOLCOS, Kevin Brooks organised a workshop on Alarm Management and the Human Machine Interface for us, some very interesting presentations on new ways of improving operator responses to evolving plant data.

A less glamorous but no less necessary task for your Executive Committee this year has been a review of SACAC’s constitution, which was last revised in 1988. In particular, we felt that the “Computation” part of the title was no longer relevant in this era of pervasive and ubiquitous computing power. We will table a proposal later this morning to adopt a revised constitution, including a name change to “South African Council for Automation and Control” which keeps our initials SACAC but aligns us more closely with our present span of activities and those of IFAC. At the same time, we have drafted a set of by-laws to give some framework to our financial and administrative activities, protection for both our officers and members that was missing from the current constitution.

Looking forward, the 17th IFAC World Congress will be held in Seoul, South Korea in July of this year. We have agreed to host another friendship evening during the event and look forward to seeing as many as possible of you there. It is important that we continue to build and maintain our links with IFAC and their technical committees so that we can attract the best talent to our international programme committee for the 2014 World Congress.

In conclusion, I would like to thank Jean McKenzie, our Secretary, for her calm and efficient management of our administration as well as her colleague Reina Aviges who has again taken care of the accounts. Both of them have served SACAC for many years and we sometimes overlook their vital contribution to the smooth running of the organisation while the rest of us rush around attending to conferences, lectures, projects and the many other crises that occur in the life of modern technocrats like all of us. I must also thank the members of our Executive Committee for all their work this year, Fernando Camisani for managing our finances, Ian Craig for handling the IFAC liaison, John Viljoen and Les Lange for standing in during my absences, and all the other members who have played their part in managing events and guiding our way forward.

Richard Roberts
5th March, 2008