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Mining interest high, but where are the engineers?

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MANILA, Philippines - At a time when the government expects an avalanche of mining investments, the country does not seem to be producing enough engineers to meet industry demand.

Mining, the government keeps on reiterating, will be a major revenue earner for the Philippines.

Noting a shortage, Richard Mills, head of a regional executive search firm, said education needed to be stepped up as the Philippines has a huge potential to become a mineral powerhouse.

A number of schools, meanwhile, are starting to look for ways to boost enrolment, noting the renewed interest in the local mining sector.

Last year, only 20 of 31 examinees passed the board exam for mining engineers, adding to the less than a hundred licensed engineers produced by the country in the past five years. The shortage is aggravated by an exodus to other mineral producers like South Africa and the United States.

In the article "Where to find the miners?" posted on his company's website, Mr. Mills said the shortage was a serious problem for developing countries like the Philippines, where the number of mining firms overcome that of mining engineering graduates.

"The global engineering sector has a critical problem these days to find the people it needs ... and the crisis [seems to be] more pronounced in the mining segment of engineering because of the peculiar nature of the business," said Mr. Mills, who is chairman of executive search firm Chaire Associates.

He cited "the violent cyclical swings typical of mineral extraction" and "the sector's less than flawless reputation at social responsibility" as primarily the reasons why young people are not lured into a career in mining.

Dr. Leslie Joy L. Diaz of the University of the Philippines College of Engineering said the number of enrollees in the school's mining engineering program had "tripled this year compared with the previous years."

But even so, Ms. Diaz — likewise the head of the college's Mining, Metallurgical and Materials Engineering department — admitted that graduates nationwide remained fewer than the labor requirements of the many mining companies mushrooming around the country.

Apart from UP, only a few universities in the Philippines offer mining engineering. Others include the Cebu Institute of Technology, Saint Louis University in Baguio, Adamson

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University, and the Mapua Institute of Technology, which was the first in the Philippines to offer the course.

Benito Shea, former chairman of Mapua's Department of Mining, Geology and Ceramics Engineering, said enrollees this semester were bigger than in the past ten years when the average was only 10 students per year.

For the year, Mapua has 20 mining engineering and geology freshmen.

Saint Louis University reopened its mining engineering program only this year. The university has a total of 29 freshmen for the first semester.

A slump in the global mining industry had fostered the lack of interest in mining engineering, said Rufino B. Bomasang, a mining engineer and a member of the Board of Mining Engineering.

From 2004 to 2007, only \$1.4 billion in mining investments entered the country. The government's goal is to attract up to \$10 billion in investments by 2011. The optimism has been bolstered by a Supreme Court decision allowing foreign ownership in the industry, although mining firms continue to contend with opposition from host communities and environmental activists.

Mines and Geosciences Bureau Director Horacio C. Ramos said his agency has also been hit by an exodus of geologists to private companies offering higher pay. Some 70 positions are vacant.

The bureau is appealing to higher-ups to exempt it from the government-wide plan to rationalize the state workforce, which prevents the hiring of more geologists.

Ms. Diaz said: "We are working on a plan of some sort, which aims to produce more graduates ... to offer a special program but details are still on the works."

Mapua, said Mr. Shea, was coordinating with people in the mining industry who were willing to fund scholarship programs for students. - **BusinessWorld**

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