

FORESTRY AND AGRICULTURAL BIOTECHNOLOGY INSTITUTE (FABI)'s 10th ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATIONS

The Forestry and Agricultural Biotechnology Institute (FABI) located at the University of Pretoria, celebrated its tenth year of existence on 14 May 2008. The celebration marked ten years of research excellence and the growth and development of one of the world's most visible PLANT BIOTECHNOLOGY centres. The FABI 10th Birthday celebrations included a symposium that brought together some of the most important stakeholders in Science and Technology in South Africa, including those from Government, Statutory Bodies and many of the country's top Universities. A special element of the event was that the FABI 10th Anniversary coincides with the 100-year anniversary of the University of Pretoria. Many speakers compared and contrasted the remarkable first 10 years of FABI to the 100 years of Science, Technology and Education EXCELLENCE at the University of Pretoria.

FABI houses the Department of Science and Technology (DST)/National Research Foundation (NRF) Centre of Excellence in Tree Health Biotechnology (CTHB), one of the seven DST/NRF Centres of Excellence (CoE's) in the country. For this reason, a feature of the FABI 10th Anniversary Celebration was to invite the Directors of all of the CoE's to showcase their exceptional achievements. This was the first time, since the establishment of the CoE's in 2004, that their activities were presented collectively to a broad audience including a wide spectrum of the Science, Technology and Education sectors of South Africa. The audience included not only high profile guests from all of these sectors and many of the top tertiary institutions but also various visitors from abroad. The presentations excited the audience as the CoE's cover a wide range of disciplines including engineering (catalysis and smart materials), medicine (TB and epidemiology of TB and HIV/Aids) and the biological sciences (birds, invasion biology and diseases of trees). Both Dr. Bethuel Shelapelo (DST) and Prof. Albert van Jaarsveld (NRF) expressed their delight at the great successes that the CoE's had all achieved in a relatively short period of time. This had particularly been in producing outstanding outputs in terms of science and also education. The data clearly showed that all of the centres have been successful in substantially increasing outputs of scientific products (papers and books) as well as post graduate students. In addition, they have all shown a remarkable ability to synergise direct CoE funding to achieve greater heights. Quoting Prof Mike Wingfield, Director of FABI "it is a tremendous pleasure to have had the opportunity

to showcase the exceptional achievements of the CoE's on the occasion of FABI's 10th Birthday”.

As part of FABI's 10th Birthday celebrations, Dr Andre Drenth of the University of Queensland, Australia, presented a keynote address on “The future of world plant health”. He made the clear point that “the world's attitude towards energy and food supplies will have to change if we are to flourish”. Interestingly, he alerted the audience to the fact that our ability to increase food production has reached a threshold and that one of the only routes to do so will be in promoting “novel methods of pest and disease control”. He further highlighted the irony that petrochemicals are being used to increase productivity of food crops and that it was “pure foolishness to then covert food products to liquid fuels”. The audience was left bursting with questions and reflecting on the future existence of mankind on the planet if research in plants and crops did not keep up with the pace of the increase in population in the world, together with the demands on the environment and its limited resources.

During the FABI 10 year celebrations two of the University of Pretoria's prestigious Chancellor's Award medals were presented. These went to Mr Rodney Hearne and Mr Mike Edwards, both of whom had made huge contributions to the research effort at FABI in the fields of banana biotechnology and forestry, respectively. The Vice-Rector: Research, Prof Robin Crewe, and the Dean of the Faculty of Natural Sciences and Agriculture, Prof Anton Ströh, officiated at this formal part of the afternoon's proceedings.

Prof Mike Wingfield, Director of FABI, had the last word at the symposium marking FABI's 10th Birthday. He presented an overview of the Institute's 10 years of growth and excellence in research and post graduate education. He made the point that FABI had begun with a small group of 50, mostly M.Sc. and Ph.D students and that it had grown to a group of some 150 academics and post graduate researchers. He said “In just ten years, FABI has gained substantial national and international recognition”. The fact that the Institute includes students from many parts of the world, speaking some 30 different home languages and including all of South Africa's 11 official languages is in his view “remarkable”. He made the point that in his opinion, “cultural diversity” has been one of the strongest forces that has promoted FABI's remarkable accomplishments in just ten years”. The numerous awards that have come to FABI “illustrate the superb and world class accomplishments that have been achieved mainly through the force associated with the activities of exceptional

people”. In his view “South Africa would benefit greatly from more institutes such as FABI which would unquestionably help the country to resolve its serious shortages in Science and Technology”. In a final presentation, Mr. Dhesigen Naidoo, Director of Research at the University of Pretoria, said that “tertiary institutions in South Africa needed to take the lead in developing important new initiatives and that they should not rely on Government to do so”.



Picture 1: Speakers at the Colloquium to celebrate the 10th Anniversary of FABI

Back row left to right: Prof Albert van Jaarsveld (Vice-President,NRF); Dr Andre Drenth (Univ of Queensland, Australia); Prof John Hargrove (DST/NRF Centre of Excellence in Epidemiological Modelling and Analysis (SACEMA), University of Stellenbosch); Prof Rob Warren (DST/NRF Centre of Excellence in Biomedical TB Research, Univ of Stellenbosch); Prof Phil Hockey, (DST/NRF Centre of Excellence in Birds as Keys to Biodiversity, University of Cape Town)

Front row left to right: Dr Bethuel Sehlapelo (Deputy Director-General: Human Capital and Knowledge Systems, DST); Prof Valerie Mizrahi (DST/NRF Centre of Excellence in Biomedical TB Research, Univ of the Witwatersrand); Prof Lesley Cornish (DST/NRF Centre of Excellence in Strong Materials, Univ of the Witwatersrand); Prof Steven Chown (DST/NRF Centre of Excellence in Invasion Biology, University of Stellenbosch)