

DST/NRF CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE IN TREE HEALTH BIOTECHNOLOGY (CTHB)

MENTORSHIP PROGRAMME IN 2005, 2006 AND 2007



Group photo of the mentorship students and their mentors

The vision for the Centre of Excellence in Tree Health Biotechnology includes a strong mentoring and outreach programme. Such a system of mentorship will make a significant impact with regards to training future academics for South Africa.

In the “Education and Training” section of the CoE Business Plan that was presented to the CoE Board in November 2004, the new “mentoring programme” for offering undergraduate assistantships was outlined.

An aspect of this plan is to specifically target undergraduate students who have the potential to follow long term careers in science, and to mentor them in the CoE. This has a number of potential consequences. Firstly selected students will be exposed to a strong culture of science in a programme that is internationally competitive. The aim is to promote postgraduate studies by mentoring them in their undergraduate studies. There is also a knock-on effect with regards to the rest of the students. It is anticipated that the whole student body will become better informed about what a career in science can offer them.

In 2005, 1st and 3rd year students were targeted. In 2006 and 2007 only 2nd and 3rd year students were recruited as it had been proved in most cases that 1st year students did not have the knowledge or capacity to be taught lab and research techniques successfully before entering their second year.

One exciting result of this mentorship programme to date is that of the six 3rd year students supported in 2005, four were chosen to do honours in 2006 (66%). Of the nine 3rd year students supported in 2006, seven were chosen to do honours (77%). This year we are supporting six 3rd year students through the programme and it will be very interesting to see if the percentage success rate for entry to the honours year remains so high. Even if only 20% of these students continue to do PhD, we will have achieved our objective. The percentage of disadvantaged students being chosen for the mentorship programme has varied between 25% and 47%. Acceptance for the programme hinges on an enthusiasm and interest in

science, as well as an academic ability to cope successfully with studies as well as working for 6 hours a week in the lab.

In addition to inspiring and informing the undergraduate student body, the mentorship programme is beneficial to post-graduate students. Having to mentor someone can be an important learning experience and being able to mentor young scientists is an essential skill that needs to be developed in post-graduate students if they are to become successful academics.

Each year the mentors and mentorship students are invited to have lunch with Professors Mike and Brenda Wingfield and other members of the CTHB team and any visiting scientists who might be visiting FABI at the time. This lunch was held on 2 October this year and enjoyed by all judging from the pictures below, despite the fact that the inclement weather meant that it had to be held indoors rather than in the beautiful FABI courtyard.



Prof. Mike Wingfield addressing the mentorship group before lunch

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