FABI Celebrates Ten Years of Excellence

The Forestry and Agricultural Biotechnology Institute (FABI) located at the University of Pretoria's main campus celebrated its 10th year of existence. FABI is a post graduate research institute in which research and education is focussed broadly on the improvement of crops related to Forestry and Agriculture. The Institute resides within the structures of the Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences and links departments such as those of Genetics, Biochemistry, Plant Sciences, Plant Production, Microbiology and Plant Pathology as well as Zoology and Entomology.

"This is a year where we not only celebrate the 10th anniversary of FABI but the 100th Anniversary of the University of Pretoria. The establishment of FABI can only be described as a resounding success. The Institute has matured and developed a nature of its own with special traditions and a unique structure," said Prof Wingfield, Mondi Professor of Forest Protection and Director of FABI. He continued to describe the exceptional grounds that FABI has covered since its official inception in 1998.

"It has grown and excelled far beyond the expectations of its stakeholders, the University of Pretoria and the many funding agencies, government, state and private companies that support its research. Individual FABIANS have won countless awards for research excellence and the Institute as a whole has been the recipient of numerous awards and accolades. And all of these accomplishments have come to us in only ten years. One can only wonder what the next ten years will bring," elaborates Prof Wingfield who recently made national headlines for having being elected a fellow of the American Phytopathological Society (APS).

Various internationally acclaimed researchers have risen from FABI and/or have been affiliated with it. A further accolade with which the Institute is particularly proud is its association with numerous exceptional female scientists. The fact that Proffs Brenda Wingfield, Jolanda Roux and Dr Marieka Gryzenhout were amongst those awarded for their excellent research contributions in 2007 was particularly pleasing. In this regard, Proffs Wingfield and Roux received Women in Water, Sanitation and Forestry Awards from the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry and Dr Gryzenhout was one of the recipients for the "Women in Science Awards 2007". Furthermore, Prof. Brenda Wingfield was runner–up in the Department of Science

and Technolgy award for exceptional research contributions by a woman scientist in 2007.

One of FABI's key aims has been to expand research opportunities and education in the rapidly growing areas of molecular biology, particularly nucleic acid based research and recombinant DNA technology. Furthermore, it has played a critical role in the establishment of a dynamic, post-graduate research environment, which has included a strong focus on building collaborative research across disciplines.

According to Prof Wingfield, FABI was a mere construct of a group of people with a vision in early 1997. By April of that same year, a decision to build a completely new research facility was made and the funding was in place to commence with the project. Architects and project managers were appointed and plans to move the team of the already well-known Tree Pathology Co-operative Programme (TPCP) at the University of the Free State, to Pretoria were initiated. Two months later, the parking lots opposite the Agriculture Building in Lunnon Road were deconstructed. The sixth floor of the Agriculture building was cleared and renovations as well as new labs were equipped.

"The first pioneers from Bloemfontein arrived on the Campus of the University of Pretoria in December of 1997. These 'trailblazing researchers' occupied the new sixth floor FABI laboratories and they helped to pave the way for the 50 students and scientists that followed in two waves during the following year. That paving was an important part of what must have been one of the largest relocations of any research group in the history of South Africa. The relocation of equipment needed to be negotiated, new salary packages and appointments resolved and many of those making the move had very special needs. One of the teams needed to relocate not only her family but a herd of breeding cattle," elaborates Prof Wingfield when asked about the transition of the concept to the actual realization of FABI as it is celebrated today.

Thus FABI was born in 1998. It rose from modest beginnings with a group of core academics, technical staff and post graduate students numbering about 50. It is worth mentioning that the group has grown to about 180 within the decade. This multinational group is so diverse in its composition – Prof Wingfield argues that at least 30 different languages are spoken at any one time. The escalating growth in student numbers eventually led to the expansion of physical facilities. Thus the FABI Square/Bioinformatics was conceived and completed in 2003. The Institute is rapidly

moving towards a point where additional facilities are required to allow for further expansion.

FABI's celebrations included a Colloquium to celebrate 10 years of FABI and the activities of the Department of Science and Technology/NRF Centres of Excellence (CoE). This is particularly justified by the fact that FABI houses the DST/NRF Centre of Excellence in Tree Health Biotechnolgy (CTHB), which was one of the first six Centres of Excellence recognised by the DST and NRF. The CoE's are physical or virtual centres of research which channel current capacity and resources to enable researchers to join forces across disciplines and institutions, on long-term projects that are locally relevant and globally competitive in order to improve the quest of research excellence and capacity development.

PICTURE 1: Prof Wingfield, Mondi Professor of Forest Pathology and Director FABI