UKZN celebrates mega graduation

UKZN's College of Agriculture, Engineering and Science has once again made a significant contribution to South Africa’s much-needed brain pool of highly-qualified science, technology and engineering specialists; awarding an impressive total of 58 PhDs out of a university total of 211, over the course of its 2014 graduation ceremonies.

In addition, an Honorary Doctor of Science (DSc) degree was awarded to Square Kilometre Array (SKA) Project Director, Dr Bernard Fakaroff, for his outstanding contribution to the promotion of science and technology in South Africa.

Graduation is one of the most important occasions in a University’s academic calendar where students, both undergraduate and postgraduate, receive their hard-earned degrees and diplomas.

UKZN conferred an impressive 10,081 degrees in total at its 21 graduation ceremonies held on its Westville and Pietermaritzburg campuses. A notable 6,282 (62.3 percent) of the graduands were women while 2,848 graduated cum laude and 1,177, summa cum laude. Some 4,785 degrees were conferred in the College of Humanities; 1,938 degrees in the College of Agriculture, Engineering and Science; 942 in the College of Health Sciences; and 2,416 in the College of Law and Management Studies.

The College of Agriculture, Engineering and Science’s 2014 PhD total is a significant increase over previous years; with 76 PhDs being awarded by the College in 2013, 77 in 2012 and 69 in 2011.

The College’s steady increase in PhD production is in line with UKZN’s strategic imperative to become the leading research-based university in the country. Marked progress is being made in this regard. In terms of the Department of Higher Education and Training’s report on 2012 institutional research output, UKZN moved from third to first place amongst South Africa’s 23 publically funded universities, in terms of the production of research publication units - the measurement system for research output used by the National Research Foundation (NRF).

UKZN produced 1,424.22 research publication units in total. PhD research showcased by the College at the 2014 graduations amounted to a rich and varied body of knowledge.

Dissertations ranged from that of freshly applied mathematician Dr Obiora Collins, who focused his research on developing new mathematical models to understand the dynamics of waterborne diseases; to Dr Julien Fattebert, whose unique and challenging biological study examined the spatial ecology of a KZN leopard population recovering from over-harvest: a study which could greatly impact the design of leopard conservation in southern Africa. Dr Nishani Harinarain earned the university’s very first PhD in Construction Management for her research into effective HIV and AIDS management within the construction sector, proving that women can succeed in a traditionally male-dominated environment.

Dr Kate Akerman proved herself to be at the cutting edge of chemistry research, with a summa cum laude PhD dissertation that investigated the use of gold (III) macrocyclic complexes in targeted anti-cancer drug production.

The new drugs being worked on by Dr Akerman have shown potential in overcoming the problem of drug resistance and have been patented. Not only is UKZN’s College of Agriculture, Engineering and Science focusing on increasing its PhD graduates; it also supports a flourishing post-doctoral research programme. During 2012 R14 million was spent on supporting 145 post-doctoral researchers. 2013 saw some 185 being recruited at a cost of over R18 million.

Acting DVC and Head of the College of Agriculture, Engineering and Science said, “The success of the College is due to the commitment and hard work of its academics, professional staff and its students. It is a pleasure to lead this group of individuals.”

UKZN’s College of Agriculture, Engineering and Science graduated a bumper crop of 99 PhDs, plus one Honorary DSc.