

Special points of interest:

- * Register for the Online SLP in Research Design
- * Meet the new Executive Dean of Humanities
- * Optentia was upgraded to a research unit
- * PhD in Social Sciences (Inclusion and Development) will be presented from 2022
- * Dr Jess Auerbach reflects on her experiences at Stanford University
- * Think-methods-Again

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From Struggling and Suffering to Flourishing

In the past year, mental health of people deteriorated in various countries. According to [Rosmarin \(2021\)](#), the incidence of mental disorders in the USA increased by 50%. Compared with before the pandemic, alcohol and substance abuse increased, young adults were more likely to consider suicide than they were in 2018. [Kim et al. \(2020\)](#) showed that the lockdown in South Africa led to threats to mental health. They found that adults were about two times more likely to experience significant depressive symptoms for one unit increase in perceived COVID-19 risk. High rates of mental illness and low availability of mental health-care amidst COVID-19 emphasises the need for immediate and accessible psychological resources. Studies (e.g., [Naidu, 2021](#); [Semo & Frissa, 2020](#)) suggest that the impact of COVID-19 on mental health is serious. Therefore, it is essential to think (again) about people's well-being. Flourishing (or thriving) refers to a state in which all aspects of a person's life are good. According to a Gallup Workplace Report, about 7 in 10 employees struggle or suffer rather than thrive. Therefore, prioritising the well-being of people is not a nice-to-have goal; it is vital for human existence and performance.

Various pathways to flourishing have been studied. Looking at the pathways to thriving, [Clifton & Harter \(2021\)](#) suggest the following elements:

- Career well-being: frequent experiences of positive affect and work engagement.
- Social well-being: meaningful friendships with people.
- Financial well-being: managing your money well.
- Physical well-being: health and energy to do things.
- Community well-being: experiences of psychological safety.

Thriving varies as much as 70% based on these five elements. Imbalance between the different elements of well-being lead to negative outcomes (such as depression, burnout, anxiety, and disease burden).

Regarding the pathways to flourishing, [Van der Weele \(2017\)](#) suggests that the following domains should be considered:

- Happiness/life satisfaction.
- Mental and physical health.
- Meaning and purpose in life.
- Character and virtue.
- Close social relationships.
- Financial and material stability.



Interestingly, Prof. Barbara Fredrickson found that [love](#) (which she defines in terms of frequent small moments of shared positivity) as a vital factor that impacts the flourishing of people.

The streams of research on well-being resulted in valuable information about the pathways to flourishing. However, people in developing countries lack the capabilities to flourish. While career well-being is regarded as a starting point for thriving ([Clifton & Harter, 2021](#)), many people in developing countries are unemployed and are living in poverty, which affect their financial well-being and opportunities to engage in work. Research in South African communities also shows that people experience a lack of psychological safety. Developing countries face wicked problems that threaten the flourishing of people. These problems can best be tackled from multi-disciplinary perspectives!

Performance of Optentia: 2021

On 30 June 2021, Optentia had 35 permanent staff members (23 with PhDs), and five support staff members. Furthermore, 40 extraordinary professors and 8 extraordinary researchers are part of the entity. A total of 37 Master's students, 47 PhD students, and three postdoctoral fellows are participating in Optentia. From 2 January to 30 June 2021, 15 (9 PhD and 6 Master's) students successfully defended their research proposals at our Scientific Committee. From 1 May to 30 April 2021, a total of 23 Master's and three PhD students have completed their studies. Researchers who participate in Optentia have produced 71.24 peer-reviewed article equivalents from January to June 2021.



“We produced 71.24 peer-reviewed articles from January to until June 2021.”

The Optentia Scorecard *by* Prof. Ian Rothmann

Output	2018	2019	2020	2021
Peer-reviewed publications	79	104	190	221
PR equivalents	35.83	55.94	68.37	71.24
National PR articles	5.53	10.27	12.59	
Papers: Conferences	17	35	1	0
Participating Master's students	46	56	96	37
Completed Master's students	26	40	23	5
Participating PhD students	34	29	35	46
Completed PhD students	12	7	3	1 (1)
Post-doctoral fellows	6	3	3	3
Number of workshops presented	25	10	9	13
Number of workshop participants	750	478	473	700

Note: Outputs as on 30 June 2021

Capability Development at Optentia

Optentia has already presented various webinars and programmes to build the competencies of participants. These webinars include the following:

- Online Short Learning Programme (SLP) in Research Design (160 participants).
- Longitudinal Structural Equation Modelling in Mplus (15 participants).
- Launch Online SLP in Research Design (289 participants).
- COVID-19 Pandemic: From Global Crisis to a Better World (110 participants).
- Book Launch: Does Community Development Work?
- Missing Value Analysis.
- Multilevel Analysis in Mplus.



- Atlas-TI and Atlas-TI for literature reviews.
 - Online Short Learning Programme (SLP) in Research Design.
- The following workshops will be presented from August 2021:
- Moderation, mediation and conditional process analysis (level 2).

Optentia researchers should contact Prof. Ian Rothmann to discuss their training needs.

“The Online SLP in Research Design is presented three times per year.”

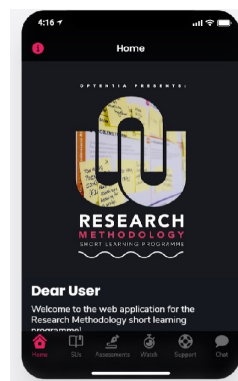
Registration: Online Short Learning Programme (SLP) in Research Design

The Online SLP in Research Design is presented three times per year:

- Cycle 1: January to April
- Cycle 2: May to July
- Cycle 3: August to November.

To register for the Online SLP in Research Design, navigate to the [Optentia website](#) (Education) and click on Short learning programmes. You will find a link to

the registration on the webpage. Please make sure that you work through the information about the Online SLP in Research Design before your register. Contact [Lynn Booysen](#) for information about the cost and administrative arrangements regarding the SLP.



New Temporary Appointments in Optentia

Two new extraordinary researchers (Dr Nereide Alhena Curreri and Dr Vasti Marais-Opperman) have been appointed in Optentia. Furthermore, the following extraordinary professors were reappointed: Prof. T. Little, Prof. A. Pot, Prof. S. Chen, Prof. E. Stander, Prof. C. van Eeden, Prof. D. du Toit and Prof. Theo Kocken.

Click [here](#) to see the list of extraordinary professors and extraordinary researchers in Optentia.

We welcome the newly appointed extraordinary researchers and professors in Optentia. We look forward to collaborate with them in research.

Introducing Prof. Dumisane Moyo: The Executive Dean of Humanities

Dumisane Moyo is currently Executive Dean in the Faculty of Humanities at North-West University. He earned a doctoral degree in Media and Communication Studies from the University of Oslo in 2006, after completing a Master of Philosophy degree from the same University in 1998. Prior to that, he completed a BA Honours in English degree (1991) and a Postgraduate Diploma in Media and Communication Studies (1995) at the University of Zimbabwe. His previous professional experience includes Senior Lecturer and Head of Department at the University of the Witwatersrand; Visiting Lecturer at University of Addis Ababa; Research Fellow at the University of Oslo; Fulbright Scholar in Residence at the College of Lake County and William Rainey Harper College, Illinois; and Lecturer at the University of Zimbabwe. Prior to joining NWU in 2021, Moyo served as Vice Dean, Teaching and Learning at the University of Johannesburg. Before that, he worked as Regional Programme Manager, Media and Access to Information at the Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa (OSISA), and as Africa Regional Manager for the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (WAN-IFRA)'s Strengthening Media and Society Project between 2010 and 2016.

His research interests include media policy and regulation; and media, politics, culture and technology in Africa. His major works include four co-edited books: *Radio in Africa: Publics, Cultures, Communities* (Wits Press, 2011); *Media Policy in a Changing Southern Africa: Critical Reflections on Media Reforms*



Prof. Dumisane Moyo is the new Executive Dean of the Faculty of Humanities at the North-West University

in the Global Age (UNISA Press, 2010); *Mediating Xenophobia in Africa: Unpacking Discourses of Migration, Belonging and Othering* (Palgrave, 2020); and *Reimagining Communication in Africa and the Caribbean: Global South Issues in Media, Culture and Technology* (Palgrave, 2021). He serves as a board member for a number of international organisations, including the Afri-

can Studies Association (ASA); the Institute for Pan-African Thought and Conversation (IPATC); the Media Monitoring Africa (MMA) and the Investigative Journalism Hub (IJ-Hub) where he is currently Board Chairperson.

“Prof. Moyo earned a doctoral degree in Media and Communication Studies from the University of Oslo in 2006 ...”



Optentia: From Research Focus Area to Research Unit

In January 2021, Optentia celebrated its 10th birthday. The seed of the Optentia Research Focus Area was planted in September 2010 when Prof. Ian Rothmann was appointed as a research professor in Industrial Psychology at the North-West University (NWU), Vanderbijlpark Campus. Dr Bertie du Plessis, a brand expert, facilitated a meeting that focused on a mission and a name for the research entity. We combined the words “optimal” and “potential” to form the name “Optentia”. The entity was approved as a research focus area in June 2012.

In June 2021, Optentia was upgraded to a research unit. This followed a refinement of its research focus, the development and support of capable staff and students, and increases in scientific outputs and postgraduate students. Figure 1 shows that the peer-reviewed article equivalents increased from 10.63 in 2012 to 68.37 in 2020. A total of 90% of publications are published in international journals.

The mission of the Optentia Research Unit is to develop and organise knowledge for the optimal expression of individual, social, and institutional potential, with a specific interest in the African context. Key to our success has been the ability to attract senior researchers (in both a permanent and temporary capacity) committed to multidisciplinary studies. We study the optimisation of the potential of people and institutions by focusing on pathways from precarity to capability and optimal functioning.

The aspirations of Optentia are as follows: a) to be a recognised, multidisciplinary research

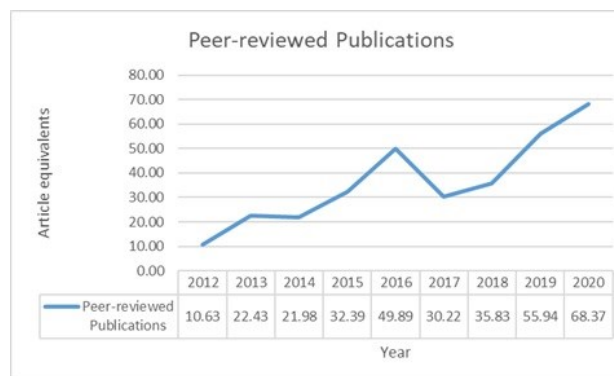


Figure 1. Optentia peer-reviewed articles: 2012-2020

unit extending its international footprint and gaining international and organisational acknowledgement for its research methodologies and outputs; b) to conduct research about the pathways from precarity to capability and optimal functioning from multidisciplinary perspectives; c) to develop and retain 21st-century researchers, support staff, and students who are capable and flourishing; and d) to contribute to the capabilities and well-being, and life success of individuals, to high-quality relationships, and to the growth of institutions on the African continent through policy interventions.

Optentia prides itself on the following aspects:

- Relevant, focused research.
- A culture of inclusivity that

facilitates a constructive, yet rigorous, research focus. This culture creates a supportive space for researchers and students across disciplines, work roles, and institutions to collaborate to conduct research, implement teaching and learning programmes, and influence policies.

- The professionalism and high academic calibre of the staff.
- The mobilisation of academic and support staff in research in multiple disciplines.
- The translational impact of the research of the entity on policy and practice levels.

Optentia has received a lot of support from the NWU, something for which we are thankful!

“Key to our success has been the ability to attract senior researchers (in both a permanent and temporary capacity) committed to multidisciplinary studies.”

New PhD in Social Sciences (Inclusion and Development) from 2022

Following the successful implementation of two new PhD qualifications in Social Sciences, namely the PhD with Relational Dynamics and Development and the PhD with Ageing and Development in 2021, a third PhD was approved. The new PhD in Social Sciences (Inclusion and Development) will be implemented by Optentia in 2022.

Inclusivity is a fundamental issue in modern democratic societies around the globe. When dealing with the challenges of a painful, imperfect reality, the vision of inclusivity serves as a persistent driver to organise for a better future where all individuals, regardless of their differences and backgrounds, are enabled to live meaningful lives that matter to them personally and to others.

Different understandings, originating from a variety of professional disciplines, of how a socially inclusive society should be organised not only focus on the barriers and processes that impede progress, but also encompass those societal elements that will enable volition, choice, active participation, equal opportunities, and basic levels of well-being that will ultimately enhance individuals' freedom to live the kinds of lives they have reason to value.

This degree provides the opportunity for the identification of those extraordinary constructive dynamics that promote inclusivity as this is manifested in diverging, developmental, and coherent ways of functioning within societal spheres. The focus is on uncovering what is virtuous in a plural world and how the challenge to organise for



an inclusive society can be dealt with constructively within social spheres.

About the PhD

This PhD aims to make a significant contribution to the contextual understanding of social inclusion and development by advancing a comprehensive understanding of how enabling practices derived from diverse disciplinary perspectives on optimal functioning can be harnessed to promote inclusivity within social spheres.

This research-oriented PhD in Social Science (Social Inclusion and Development) is a first in Africa and aims to explore issues in relation to social inclusion and development from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. The purpose is to provide insights into what capabilities, strengths, constructive processes, states, and conditions within micro, meso, and macro levels of functioning are important in explaining and promoting individual and collective thriving and to apply new knowledge to plan and implement appropriate interventions, activities, and proposals in

complex societal contexts that do not yet function cohesively.

Entry requirements

As a minimum, applicants should hold the equivalent of the following South African qualifications: A master's degree with a mark of at least 65% (or an equivalent qualification as approved by Senate) in any discipline related to social development and/or management in different contexts across multiple levels (individual, familial, societal, and/or policy/programmatic environments). For international applicants, an evaluation certificate issued by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) must be submitted if a previous qualification was obtained in a foreign country. The number of candidates who will be accepted is subject to the entity's policy and capacity. All applications are assessed based strictly on academic merits and requirements.

For more information, please contact [Prof. Marita Heyns](#).

"Inclusivity is a fundamental issue in modern democratic societies around the globe."

My PhD Journey *by* Dr Japie Greeff

As the interface between university and professional practice has always interested me, I decided to focus my research on capstone projects in engineering. These are the final year projects that engineering students do in their last year of study that effectively act as a bridge between their life as a student, where they learn theory and prepare for tests, and their life as a professional where they are predominantly measured in their ability to apply their skills to practical problems. The goals of the study were threefold:

- To increase engagement in students,
- To streamline the logistics of the course being presented to solve some of the practical problems, and
- To explore what it means to go through the process of becoming an engineer.

The work was approached with a Design Science Research methodology where the idea was to not only explore the context in theory, but also to build a series of artefacts that would actively solve problems in the course and increase engagement and motivation in the students. From a theoretical perspective I dove into the concept of motivation and this is where I was first exposed to Self-determination Theory, Gameful design, and Authentic learning concepts. I also explored the history of engineering education in South Africa and how we came to have the system we have today.

In solving the problems that were identified in the course I developed a gamified system for the University of Johannesburg

that is still in use today that supports students through all of the phases of their growth through the course. The three main capabilities of the system are as follows:

- I implemented a modified stable marriage algorithm for allocation that matches students with supervisors based on the preferences they have for different fields of study,
- I implemented a location-based game that is used during project presentations to encourage interaction between junior students, senior students, faculty and industry representatives,
- I implemented a challenge-based system that allows students to do small projects to increase their academic resilience in areas where they fall short throughout the year and wrapped the entire system in a web based portal that allows students and faculty to have a social media style presence where they can comment on pages that are made for study areas and projects.

The system was tested between 2016 and 2018 and the results of both the feedback obtained from students and faculty, as well as the results students obtained in the course showed a positive impact. Although academic performance was not the main goal, but rather to enrich the experience, it was good to know that it made a positive impact.

It was quite a journey to explore psychological concepts, coming from a background that was predominantly technical before this, but I believe the PhD



Dr Japie Greeff

allowed me to grow as a person and see things from a multitude of different perspectives outside of the purely technical one I was used to.

In retrospect the only problem with doing a PhD is that while you are learning so much while working on it, there are all these other concepts that you are exposed to that then stay just out of your grasp because they aren't within the scope you are looking at. As I learned more and more, I felt that I knew less. It made me acutely aware of impostor syndrome and this is now something I watch out for in my own students.

Ultimately, I am glad to now be Dr Greeff, and look forward to one day being Prof. Greeff as well :) Watch this space!

“As I learned more and more, I felt that I knew less. It made me acutely aware of impostor syndrome.”

Optentia is Top of the POPS

Positive Organisational Psychology (POP) is a fast-growing field, and Optentia is among the top 10 in the world for publications and citations in this field. Optentia's top 10 status in the world of POP, is confirmed in a recent article titled "Positive Organizational Psychology: A Bibliometric Review and Science Mapping Analysis", published in the International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health. The article reports on the first bibliometric analysis done on publications and citations in the field of POP globally. This study entailed the analysis of 7 181 articles published on POP on the Web of Science Core Collection (WoSCC). Work contributing to POP came from 123 countries on five continents, with 60 countries each contributing more than 10 works. The 10 countries that produced the most publications were the United States, Canada, China, the Netherlands, Spain, South Africa,



Prof. Ian Rothmann



Prof. Marius Stander



Click on the image above to read more

the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy and Australia. Although Optentia has a specific interest in knowledge for the optimal expression of individual, social and institutional potential in the African context, it is increasingly active in the global research community as well. "We have a number of young recently completed PhDs and many who are currently registered, who will make a difference in the future," says Prof Ian Rothmann, director of Optentia.

"I think our current programmes present exciting opportunities to not only contribute to development in Africa, but also to

make an international impact with our multidisciplinary approach." He says Optentia incorporates and utilises inputs from multiple disciplines such as economics, educational sciences, employment relations, human resource management, information technology, philosophy, risk management, social anthropology, social work, sociology and of course psychology (work and organisational psychology, educational psychology, counselling psychology and clinical psychology). Optentia is changing the way we look at our world and at work, and that future looks positive.

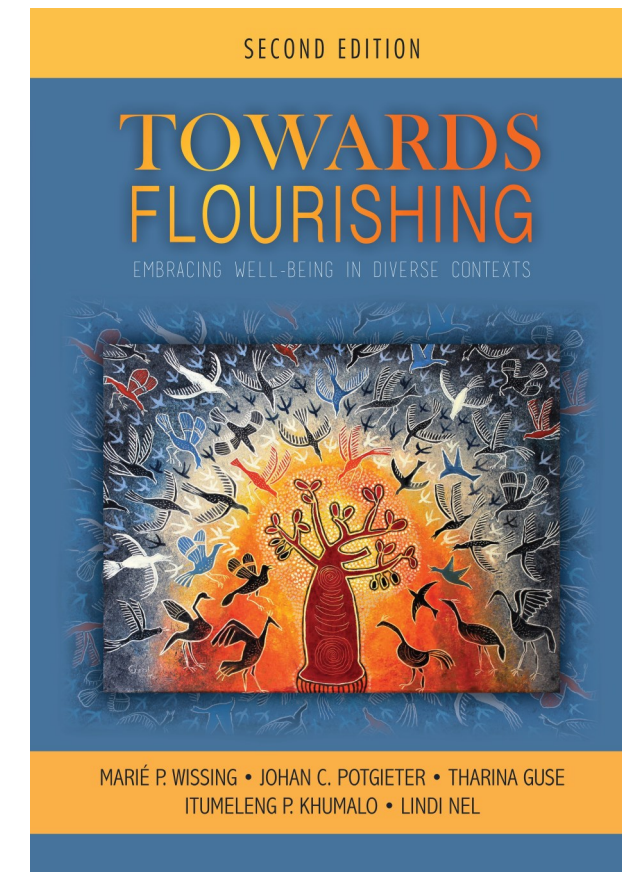
"Optentia is changing the way we look at our world and at work, and that future looks positive."



Flourishing, and Moving Forward *by* Prof. Johan Potgieter

It has been a year since the publication of the revised (second) edition of our locally authored positive psychology textbook, "Towards Flourishing: Embracing well-being in diverse contexts". Although the realities of the COVID pandemic has thwarted plans for a book launch, one year later we can celebrate the fact that the revised edition has been received very well. Hundreds of students from different universities have successfully completed their modules in positive psychology using the new edition as their primary text.

The new edition highlights the developments and changes in the vibrant scientific field of positive psychology during the past decade, with particular reference to the newly emerging Third Wave (P3.0). It also includes findings from the newly developing field of multidisciplinary well-being studies as well as other quality-of-life studies enhancing well-being in diverse contexts. With the increasing emphasis on decolonizing the psychological curriculum, the inclusion of (South) African perspectives on well-being from various South African con-



tributors is timely, and necessary. It is our hope that this publication will serve as a valuable tool in the education of undergraduate and postgraduate students alike, and empower them to continue looking for the best in themselves and others.

As the editorial team, we would like to express our sincere gratitude to all our chapter contributors, and to Van Schaik publishers for making this dream come true.

Forté!

“With the increasing emphasis that is placed on decolonizing the psychological curriculum, the inclusion of (South) African perspectives on well-being from various (South) African contributors is both timely, and necessary.”

Student Well-being During the Covid-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in radical changes within the (higher) education system. These changes have posed new challenges for university students, and many social welfare agencies have warned that it could adversely affect their mental health and well-being. Students may experience higher levels of stress, depression and anxiety (common mental health problems), and lower levels of

emotional, psychological and social well-being due to COVID-19 regulations implemented by the government. This is largely because vital study related resources (e.g. information availability, growth opportunities, peer and lecturer support) have become inaccessible, and study-related demands may have increased significantly. But how did the COVID-19 pandemic really affect students, and how can we

manage the possible consequences? The answer may surprise you. In a recent webinar, Prof. Llewellyn van Zyl illustrated what study characteristics (demands/resources), common mental health problems and well-being looked like before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. To view the full webinar, please click [here](#).

StatsCamp 2022

Analytical competence is of great importance to conduct social and psychological research. The Optentia Research Unit, in collaboration with two international experts on statistical analysis (Prof. Todd D Little and Prof. Rens van de Schoot), will present a Stats Camp in South Africa. Stats Camp is an internationally recognized award-winning educational event focused on advanced statistical training at a graduate and postgraduate level.

This unique Stats Camp Analysis Retreat brings experts across a wide range of statistical and methodological disciplines together in one place, for the purpose of helping you tackle any issues you are facing with your personal research project. Our instructors and teaching assistants form a collaborative network to help guide you through your research process, and we encourage you to take advantage of this unique opportunity to work with our team to bring your research to the next level.

Stats Camp analysis retreats are highly relevant to current trends and practices in modern advanced statistical analysis. They enable researchers to get practical "hands-on" instruction that delivers practical value.

About the Analysis Retreat

We ask the participants to bring their own data and they should be interested in analysing SEM models. The goal of the week is to help them to run their models in Mplus or R (lavaan, blavaan, stan) and maybe even to finalise their results section. The workshop will focus on hands-on training in statistical software, including lavaan, Mplus and missing data



Prof. Todd Little



Prof. Rens van de Schoot

“This unique Stats Camp Analysis Retreat brings experts across a wide range of statistical and methodological disciplines together in one place.”



Click on the image above to watch a video about the 2019 StatsCamp at Mongena Lodge



Participants in the 2019 StatsCamp

treatments in R. For more information and to register for StatsCamp 2022, click [here](#). You may also contact [Lynn Booyesen](#) for more information about the arrangements for the StatsCamp.

Imago Africa Conference 2021: The Science of Human Connection

Human connectedness defines the greatest need humanity faces in 2021. Meaningful connection is what makes our lives matter and it is key that we are connected like never before in human history, laying a foundation for worldwide empathy, innovation and human expression. Despite the exponential growth of digital connection, the quality of our real and lived relationships is buckling under the strain of forced isolation, fear, and an uncertain future.

How do we nurture our human connection to shape a future where our relationships become our most valued resources? In this hybrid conference, leading social scientists, emerging researchers and practitioners who work within a relational paradigm will offer their insights on how we are to understand and develop the science of human connection in our changing world. Presenters will interrogate the new shapes that relational science is taking locally in South Africa, the greater African continent and globally. The Science of Human Connection will create a space for a variety of inclusive conversations, research presentations, interactional opportunities, practical applications, multidisciplinary collaboration and community projects, informed by a holistic and relational paradigm, with

specific emphasis on African philosophies. We offer a virtual experience and in-person experience, with some innovative ideas and interactive encounters on how relational dynamics can impact the quality of our lives and provide an antidote to individual isolation, interpersonal disruptions, racial and gender-based violence, and policies that continue to sustain poverty, corruption and disconnection.

In the western world, the mental, emotional and physical health of the individual is deemed primary to their well-being. In Africa, well-being has been informed by a relational paradigm, the most well-known of this being the concept of "Ubuntu" which is part of an isiZulu phrase "Umntu ngumuntu ngabantu" meaning "I am because you are", or more literally "A person is a person

through other people". Our future is determined by how we connect, engage and participate in our local and global networks NOW. Every interaction counts.

Access the conference website [here](#). Click [here](#) to register for the conference. Carol-Ann Dixon is the Imago Africa Conference co-ordinator.



Carol-Ann Dixon

"Our future is determined by how we connect, engage and participate in our local and global networks NOW."



A Reflection on Postgraduate Study at Stanford University

I was recently walking across the Potchefstroom campus in the early afternoon, and the light had a particular golden quality to it. Students flew past on bicycles, and suddenly I was transported back to my doctoral studies on the other side of the world, at another institution that also feels like an island in the space that it is in: Stanford University.

My journey to Stanford was a combination of luck, tenacity and hard work, and I believe one doesn't get into such spaces at any level without a combination of all three. As an undergraduate at UCT who had come in from the alternative schooling sector, I only gradually even realised I had academic talent. I knew I had areas of passionate interests and wanted to study for more than three years, but had no clear plan beyond that and no awareness that my grades had been in any way unusual. Crucially though, I was in a department that had an active program of identifying talented undergraduates and mentoring them, and that made all the difference.

One of the opportunities that the mentorship program at UCT opened up was a chance to present my honours research at a local conference, at which James Ferguson – at the time head of Stanford Anthropology – would be the keynote speaker. James' writing had changed my thinking about the world and like my friends I was excited to listen to him. His talk was in a crowded hall at the University of the Western Cape. It felt like a dorky version of a rock concert, and I loved it.

Later that day, I gave my own talk, and I remember getting

tangled in my notes, faltering, and then just speaking frankly to the audience about my nascent research. I was 23 at the time. I had no idea that of all the panels, the mighty James Ferguson had come to listen to the students (he sat at the back, my vision is poor), and when he approached me afterwards I was so shy I could barely squeak a response. He told me he'd liked my work and my sense of humour, and that I should consider applying to his program. I didn't know what to say so I ran away as quickly as possible.

That evening I googled Stanford. I remember seeing how far away it was from home, from my twin brother, from South Africa, which due to my activism work and family background, I was deeply committed to. I liked the motto 'the wind blows freedom' but I was sceptical about the United States. 'Dear Professor Ferguson' I wrote in an email 'thanks, but no thanks, I don't want to be complicit in Western intellectual imperialism'. I paraphrased, but that was the gist.

To my enduring astonishment, James Ferguson replied. Instead of dismissing the concerns I had raised about the politics of knowledge production or simply ignoring me, he invited me into dialogue. He copied three of his postgraduate students – from India and the US – and we began a six-month email discussion about what it means to know the world. His act of intellectual generosity completely changed my life, and after a brief stint as a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford doing an MSc in Forced Migration Studies, I embarked on a PhD under his guidance, with his three post-



Dr Jess Auerbach

graduate students acting as gentle older siblings to guide me through.

I loved Stanford, and I found it incredibly challenging. It is a place that has no trouble assuming its rights to lead the world, and has the money to underwrite that activity. In my first year, I had constant crises: in the university store, where capitalism and consumerism and branding came together in a raw scream of power, to the library when I was told I could take out as many books as I wanted for as long as I liked. It made me think of short-loan in the library in undergrad where I could have one book for two hours at a time, and again and again and again I wanted to shout 'this isn't fair, for the world'.

Of course, for me, it was awesome, and the world had opened at my feet. But I cried every evening of my first year because it was also so far away, and so lonely, and it took time to make the friendships that got me through (I have a godson in Chicago now; one day I'll tell him how his mom – a PhD student at the time from Rio de Janeiro – helped me on a Portuguese assignment I would have failed without a Brazilian intervention).

“Instead of dismissing the concerns I had raised about the politics of knowledge production or simply ignoring me, he invited me into dialogue.”

A Reflection on Postgraduate Study at Stanford University

In the USA I learned that confidence is actively taught. Stanford undergraduates are very bright, but no more intelligent than my top students in Angola, in South Africa, in Brazil or in Mauritius. At 18, there's relatively little that distinguishes them. After four years, however, of being immersed in an environment where people do work exceptionally hard, where resources flow with the abundance of a 4.5 billion-dollar annual operating budget, and of being constantly told that they are the smartest people on earth, the students transform. They have been taught to take a particular place in the world, and for the most part they do so with confidence and ease.

For me, the journey was more complicated. I never quite fit in the USA, too aware of the systems that shape the world unevenly, grappling with a whiteness that until Trump's election felt consciously produced as invisible. I was terrified of not being up to speed – all my classmates had done undergrad in the Ivy League, or equivalent – and it took a long time to understand how to flourish in a university system where instead of constraints, one was only limited by the possibilities of imagination.

But I did flourish, and on so many levels I was incredibly happy. Today the university appears in my dreams whenever I need to re-centre and find my voice. My vision was opened to the entire globe, I was able to travel, I was able to do research and gain access to places and people and questions, and I realised that my unusual journey gave me a certain edge, a certain perspective, that some people found valuable.



I wanted to come home, but I finished up around the time of #RhodesMustFall. South African Universities were not hiring much at that point and an opportunity emerged to work instead in Mauritius. I spent three years there, which was an excellent bridge, not least because it allowed me to settle into myself, spent time with my life-partner, and integrate who I had been before with my own transformation through the PhD. American confidence is read as arrogance in this part of the world – I needed time to tone it down, learn to speak softly again, to write my first book.

I was hired at NWU at the height of the pandemic, and was surprised by yet another unexpected opportunity that life has thrown. It's an unusual institution in the South African context, because of who it admits and how it works across the three campuses, and how its history forces it to confront the past, the present and the future with frankness and pragmatism. I like that. It feels that there is space to work, to build, to have the honest conversations that are needed in South Africa.

What I have slowly come to understand, is that it is moving

that helps a person to see the world from many angles, and this is useful, even when it challenges. At Stanford I could not un-see US American knowledge systems in context, and in South Africa, I now find the same. In that way Optentia has offered me a space where I can build bridges, where international collaborations may flourish, and where multiple approaches to both questions and answers are explored with curiosity and generosity.

It's good to be here, and I thank you all for welcoming me. I might sometimes wear my red-branded sweatshirt and forget to speak softly, but I will also be listening closely, and if I can support a student, open any doors, or simply share a little of the strange confidence that elite institutions so consciously impart, it would be a privilege and a joy to do so in this community.

"In the USA I learned that confidence is actively taught."

Think – methods – Again *by* Prof. Leoni van der Vaart

In this edition of the newsletter, we want to introduce you to our methods corner. This corner aims to share insights on methods-related developments or issues that challenge us to re-think how we do re(we)search. In each edition, we will ask someone to contribute to this corner or volunteer to share your insights if you have new developments to share!

The Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP) recently published an article written by Kevin R. Murphy. In this publication, the author argues that current publications (in the field of organisational psychology and perhaps in other fields in the social sciences) tend to neglect descriptive statistics favouring more complex (inferential statistics). According to the author, this imbalance creates several challenges: (a) complex statistical techniques are often incorrectly applied and interpreted, (b) the infamous p-value is more important than the size of the effect and both producers and consumers of research scan the literature in search of significant results (i.e., they are 'stargazing'), and (c) the limited practical utility of findings. To address these challenges, it is proposed that researchers spend more time discussing (a) 'Table 1' (means, standard deviations, and correlations), (b) what its contents (e.g., distributions) mean for subsequent techniques, (c) the boundary conditions of the study and its findings (e.g., did you have dissatisfied people in your study on job satisfaction), and (d) how the descriptive statistics support (e.g., correlation coefficients) support (or contradicts) the inferential sta-



tistics (e.g., regression coefficients). For more information and references to other valuable sources: Murphy, K. R. (2021). In praise of Table 1: The importance of making better use of descriptive statistics. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Perspectives on Science and Practice*, 14(4).

Qualitative researchers often use thematic analysis (TA) as their preferred data analysis method. In a recent article, Braun and Clarke (2021) encourage researchers to "engage in careful conceptual and design thinking to produce TA research with methodological integrity" (p. 1). They introduce researchers to the three leading schools of TA (i.e., coding reliability, codebook, and reflexive TA) and illustrate how reflexive TA intersects with various elements of the research design [i.e., research questions; data collection methods; participant group/data set selection ("sampling universe" is an interesting term), strategies to select them, and information power/theoretical sufficiency; and ethics]. They conclude their publication with a discussion of (personal, functional, and disciplinary) reflexivity as a central

quality assurance criterium in reflexive TA and provide reporting standards for reflexive TA researchers and reviewers. For more information and references to other valuable sources: Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). Conceptual and design thinking for thematic analysis. *Qualitative Psychology*.

Important Note

The Protection of Personal Information (POPI) Act came into full effect in South Africa on 1 July 2021. The Act will be used as a reference in instances where people feel that their personal information is abused or institutions demand personal information when it is not necessary. The POPI Act has implications for researchers in South Africa. Prof. Leoni van der Vaart presented a workshop on the implications of the POPI Act for research ethics. A video and slides of her presentation is available here. Please contact [Lynn Booyesen](#) to obtain a password to access these resources.

"... publications tend to neglect descriptive statistics favouring more complex (inferential statistics)."

The Ethics Corner *by* Prof. Jacques Rothmann

Your ethics application contributes to the development of your research skills and your methodological proficiency, particularly as it relates to safeguarding the rights of your participants, yourself and the North-West University. To contribute to this, the BaSSREC and HSSREC implore you to observe the following ethical guidelines while preparing your application for submission.

Before submitting your ethics application, ask yourself the following questions:

- Did I submit my relevant documents? Click [here](#) for more information.
- Did I provide a thorough justification for including and excluding certain participants and other units of analyses for my present study? This is not simply a scientific consideration. It is an ethical matter too. It speaks to how you apply the ethical principle of distributive justice; i.e. why should some people provide input as opposed to others? How will these persons benefit more from the study as opposed to those who have been excluded? You, therefore, have to clearly explain how the inclusion of your chosen participants will contribute to answering your research question and achieve your research objectives.
- Did you indicate what the outputs of your study will be? Posing this question in the ethics application form and informed consent leaflet is not a tautological practice. Your participants have contributed to your study by availing themselves to share their life-experiences and it is imperative that you indicate how you will share your findings with them. Consider the fact that they may not necessarily have access to published Master's dissertations or a doctoral thesis; consider the use of information sessions to groups,



compiling and sharing information leaflets or summaries for their perusal.

- Did you consider all possible risks and mitigation strategies that relate to your study? Consider how your topic may contribute to emotional or psychological distress (how will you address this) and/or fatigue (what about a break?).
- Did you consider the impact of Covid-19? By simply indicating that you will observe Covid-19 regulations and restriction levels or attaching Covid-19 protocols to your application is not enough. You have to apply it to your study: Will you provide them with three-ply masks? Will you use hand-sanitizer? Will you observe social distancing? To avoid Covid-19 infections, you have to also consider alternative data collection avenues, e.g. virtual interviews and focus groups come to mind. Refer to the last page of the BaSSREC and HSSREC informed consent leaflet to guide you in this regard.
- Did you provide a step-by-step discussion of gaining informed (do they understand what the study is about; what will they have to do?), voluntary (they need to understand that participation is based on free-will) and specific consent (why is this study important?). Do not assume that the committee will understand the role of gatekeepers who will potentially assist you to access participants (note this; indicate your process to gain gatekeeper approval; note who they are and how they will assist you); who will obtain informed consent (i.e. you or an independent person); when will this be done; how long will prospective participants have to consent to participating (a week or two?). Be as specific as possible.
- How will I ensure:
 - ◊ Anonymity: Thus, will you assign pseudonyms/codes or will your participants choose this?
 - ◊ Privacy: How will you avoid unnecessary probing? Where will the data collection take place to provide your participants with privacy?
 - ◊ Confidentiality: How will you de-identify the biographical data/information to avoid linking any participant with the particular study? Be specific about who will have access to this data? Why? What are their roles in this regard? How and where will you store the data? According to NWU Guidelines, you should store the data for a period of 5 years.

Please consult the following links to the respective ethics committee web pages:

- [BaSSREC](#):
- [HSSREC](#)

“Did you consider all possible risks and mitigation strategies that relate to your study?”

The Sunflower Intervention *by* Nanette Minnaar

Nanette Minnaar was one of the students who enrolled for the Masters in Positive Psychology programme which Optentia presented in 2018. Despite all the challenges that social distancing due to Covid regulations presented, she was able to complete her degree and graduate (cum laude) earlier this year. Here is what she has to say about her study:

What surprised me the most was that I was inspired and motivated by my own intervention. My study aimed to better understand what should be included in a PPI to increase intrinsic motivation to treat substance use disorders.

The Sunflower Positive Psychology (PPI) Intervention was based on theory, namely the Self-Determination Theory, and on the expertise of people with substance use disorders (SUD) and practitioners (experts) working with them.

The feedback from the people with SUD and experts revealed that it is a promising way to improve the much-needed motivation to support



the prevention of treatment drop-out and the recovery thereof.

It is remarkable that this intervention has the potential to assist people struggling with SUD to complete their treatment and recover from their SUD. I wish you could experience the positive effect this intervention has on people with SUD and experts in the field. I recently trained implementors of the intervention (social workers) in the facilitation of the second of six workshops themed My Best Possible Self. This workshop is aimed at assisting people with SUD in finding the best version of themselves by leaving behind the "mask of substance abuse".

After the participants have created their masks and identi-

fied their destructive patterns of addiction, they create a Best Possible Self Hat. The atmosphere in the room changed completely. They found it so gratifying to create a hat representing what they ache to achieve in their lives! I'm including a picture of the group with their hats.

I believe we can all benefit from strength-based interventions and build our positive capabilities. If something inspires you, it will possibly also inspire others. I always liked sunflowers because on dark days they will still stand tall and find the sunlight. Now my Sunflower PPI may inspire people with SUD to complete their treatment and live a life of sobriety. Thank you Optentia!

"What surprised me the most was that I was inspired and motivated by my own intervention."



A New Skillset and Mindset *by* Anjonet Jordaan

This past week I attended a meeting hosted by North-West University's top management to give the average staff member of the university insight in where we are and where we are going amidst the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. I imagine that tertiary education institutions worldwide are hosting similar conversations. Last year around this time, most of us imagined that this whole pandemic business will be wrapped up around Christmas and everything will be going back to "normal" after that.

Obviously, it didn't turn out that way and the projects we temporarily put on hold will now require what top management calls agility. While some projects have gone on despite the lockdown, others must now be re-imagined to compensate for an



altered reality that will be with us in one form or another for quite some time.

How do you extend digital research tools to reach communities who don't possess the same level of access? Our creativity will be challenged to continue doing research with real impact amidst the shifting pandemic

reality. Yet, it is during the most challenging times that humanity has shown to be the most innovative and I'm sure we will find our way through this as well.

Let's continue to contribute the insight and knowledge that is needed now more than ever.

“How do you extend digital research tools to reach communities who don't possess the same level of access?”

PhD Proposals Approved by Optentia

Various PhD students in Industrial Psychology and Social Sciences presented their research proposals in June 2021. The title of the PhD thesis of Neil Barnard is: "Towards sustainable employment of emergency nurses within the South African context: The effects of constraints, resources and capabilities." The title of the thesis of Praise Choeni is: "Gender inequality and well-being of women in the work context: The effects of stereotyping, organisational culture, and voice climate." Suzette Ragadu focuses on early childhood practitioners. The title of her thesis is: "The quality of employment of early childhood development practitioners in the South African context: Applying the capability approach." The title of the thesis of



Neil Barnard



Praise Choeni



Henry Lewis



Suzette Ragadu

Henry Lewis, a PhD student from Jamaica, is: "Capability, optimal functioning, and sustainable employability of workers in Jamaica's service sector: A generational perspective."

The research proposal of Lynelle Coxen, a PhD student in Industrial Psychology was also approved. Three PhD students received ethics clearance for their studies: Christiaan Bekker, Tessa de Wet and Thera Lobi.

Extraordinary Researcher: Dr Curreri *by* Prof. Jaco Hoffman

Dr Nereide Curreri is a pivotal member of a project (funded by the International Association of Gerontology and Geriatrics [IAGG] [Global Social Issues on Aging](#) [GSIA]) to understand the mechanisms of rural and remote communities in the Global South and their ability to be supportive to older people. (Click [here](#) for more information.) To this end, Optentia partnered with colleagues in sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America. There is huge potential for partnerships between African and Latin-American universities and other stakeholders. However, the language divide is an obvious barrier. This is where Nereide comes into the picture as she is - apart from being an excellent scholar and wonderful human being - academically comfortable in both English and Spanish. Part of the reason is her background. Nereide is from Milan, Italy and has lived, worked and studied in the United States of America,

The Netherlands, Scotland, and Central America. She worked more than six years in direct care in residential care facilities and home care, then completed a PhD in Dementia Studies from the University of Stirling, UK. Her research investigated the integration of older adult services for families with dementia in Central America through a social network approach. She spent one year in five Central American countries collecting data. She obtained a Master's in Gerontology from Vrije University Amsterdam, the Netherlands in 2011, researching the stress factors affecting work engagement of nursing staff in residential care homes in Italy. Apart from her visiting position at Optentia, Nereide is research assistant at the University of Stirling (Scotland, UK) and researcher at the International Foundation of Integrated Care, Oxford. She is also Chair of the Emerging Researchers and Professionals in Integrated



Dr Nereide Curreri

Care. As a gerontologist, she is passionate about dementia and supporting the integration of care and wellbeing at micro, meso and macro levels, especially in Lower and Middle-Income Countries. By facilitating reflective practices and international knowledge transfer, the focus on biomedicine can shift to actions that prioritise social determinants of health.

We welcome Nereide and hope to do so in person, sooner rather than later!

“By facilitating reflective practices and international knowledge transfer, the focus on biomedicine can shift to actions that prioritise social determinants of health.”

Supervision in the PHD Programmes at Optentia

The two new PhD programmes at Optentia (Relational Dynamics and Ageing) are in full swing and we are extremely grateful to co-supervisors for their knowledge and insight. Dr Matthews Katjene reflects on the PhD supervision journey with specific reference to the PhD in Relational Dynamics:

A new journey always evokes anxiety, apprehensiveness, uncertainty, excitement, inquisitiveness and curiosity. These attributes are shared by both the Supervisor and Supervisee in this PhD programme. The sole aim by both the Supervisor and Supervisee in undertaking this process is to produce high quality work with notable contribution to the body of knowledge and informing fu-

ture studies. The Supervisor's role is to ensure this ideal is realized by providing guidance and mentorship. The key realization is that the supervisor-supervisee relationship is integral to achieve research objectives. It is a humbling experience for me personally to apply my broad range of skills and knowledge in the supervision process. The journey is about co-creating the process with refinement of the Supervisee's thoughts into a researchable topic. The journey offers a learning experience for both parties involved but most importantly for the Supervisee whose growth is evident from one supervision session to the next.



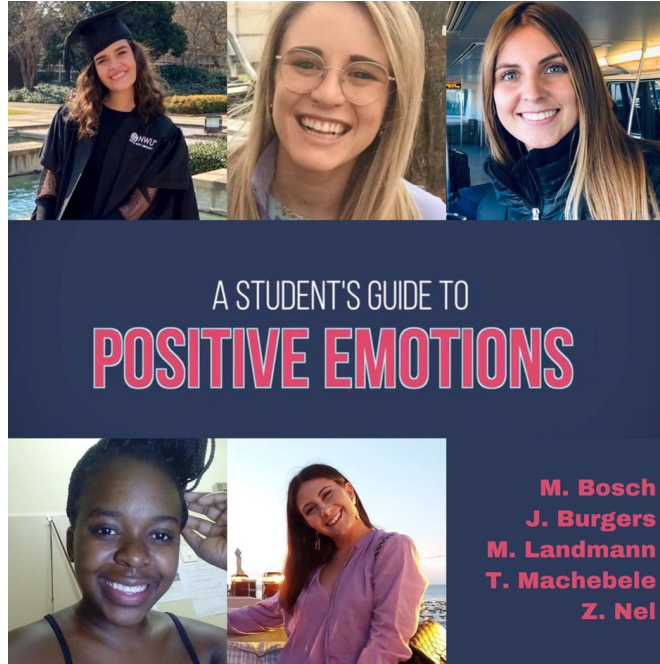
Dr Matthews Katjene

It is a gratifying experience when the research comes together and the Supervisee gains more confidence and grasps concepts that are critical in undertaking the planned research. Supervision is an opportunity for being part of birthing something new and fresh!

Our Students Flourishing!

It is a privilege to teach at a university that offers positive psychology at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Our postgraduate course focuses strongly on the application of positive psychology theory, and the community interventions that the Honours students create count among the annual highlights. Every year we are amazed at the creativity and initiative that our students bring to this project, and this year was no exception. In spite of the challenges posed by Covid and online learning, student groups from all three of our campuses impressed us with the online interventions that they developed. Not only does this give them an opportunity to see this vibrant scientific field in practice, but they seem to experience both hedonic and eudaimonic well-being in the process, as can be seen in the reflection form this year's winning group:

"Our group thoroughly enjoyed the Positive Psychology module this semester. The content of the module was uplifting, and this intervention was an exciting opportunity for us to see



how our knowledge could be practically applied which also enriched our understanding of our role as future mental health care workers. We hope that our video intervention will help to increase the well-being of high school students in South Africa by showing them ways of focusing on the positive side of life – something that is especially important during the challenging times we live in today!"

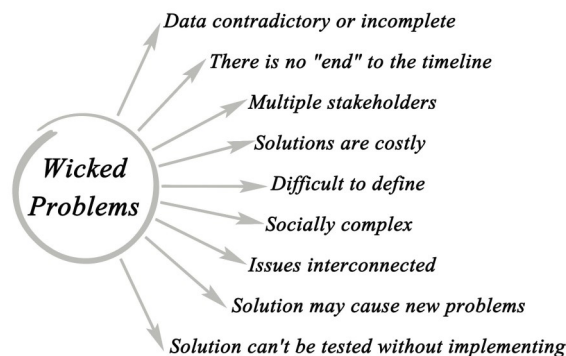
Monique Bosch, Juanita Burgers, Margo Landmann, Tino Machebele and Zoé Nel.

Congratulations from the positive psychology module team, young ladies! We hope that you will continue looking for what is best and bravest in yourselves, and those you serve. Prof. Vicki Koen, Mr Christiaan Bekker, and Prof. Johan Potgieter

"We hope that our video intervention will help to increase the well-being of high school students in South Africa."

Wicked Problems: A Starting Point for Research

Wicked problems refer to issues that are highly resistant to resolution through existing problem-solving methods. Wicked problems include war, climate change, disease, poverty, food and water security, social justice issues, cancer, sustainability, terrorism, cyber security, aging and dementia. An important way to deal with wicked problems include: is to examine *how* we are thinking, reasoning or talking.



The Opportunity in the Chaos *by* Tessa de Wet

“The Covid-19 pandemic showed us how quickly change can be required...”

During the past months, some of the life experiences that presented themselves have had my ‘free-thinking’ time turning to how to harness opportunity during chaos. The Covid-19 pandemic showed us how quickly change can be required and how flexible rules and regulations need to be in order to be able to respond to these rapid-change needs. This is not new information – the proponents of the Fourth Industrial Revolution have been bringing this under our attention for a long time prior to the start of the pandemic. The effects of the pandemic have brought very few new problems, but it has managed to expose those areas of our world that are fraught with ineffective ways of doing and being, and yet we seem to want things to ‘go back to normal’. In many ways we have seen how quickly (and resiliently) the whole world can adapt and change to accommodate the realities and requirements of the moment. Yet, generally, we seem to see this rapid response need for change and different requirements as a short-lived hurdle to be overcome – our methods and regulations still require vast amounts of processing time and resources and we seem to be waiting for this “inconvenient” period of having to respond rapidly to be over with, in order to continue the way we did things previously.

What if, instead, we realised the opportunity to reset our institutions’ systems and to rethink and reorganise what we see as valued and valuable in the way we do things? What if we harnessed this sense of urgency and crisis as the “new normal” and rather re-organise ourselves to deal with it? We could certainly use some of the change momentum to rethink a few areas. I share some of my recent experiences and observations below.

The life-threatening (both literal and figurative) delays in getting ethical clearance and permissions have been telling. It begs the question how ethics and other regulatory committees can become more effective by safely and ethically accelerating ethical clearance to empower researchers to keep progressing and make an impact in their field. We are all aware of the delays in clearance for medication and clinical trials for Corona vaccines, but as example close to home, in the past four years of my minimal risk PhD project’s journey, approximately one whole year had been sacrificed to ethical approvals and re-approvals and back and forth and waiting in order to be able to step out and collect the necessary data during a time when the window to do so was minute and every ‘wasted’ day meaning less data to conduct meaningful research with. I am aware of colleagues at other universities who were on the verge of handing in their final project, while still waiting for their ethical clearance. Should the functionality of ethics committees be revisited?

Another challenge relates to the balance between digitalising and building sustainable relationships with our researched audience. How do we conceptualise solutions for barriers to entry created by the need to minimise the risk of physical proximity, without losing the personal relatedness that feels nearly impossible to achieve through digital and online media? In one year of data collection online, I managed to get 30% of the needed responses, with the contact process entailing cold calling every high school principal in Tshwane by phone, producing a video to introduce the study, sending follow-up emails and doing follow-up emails/calls. On the other hand I had a window of about four weeks to do



Tessa de Wet

data collection using paper surveys, which entailed either making an appointment (or just cold-calling) at the school, having a quick discussion with the Principal, and making two follow-up collection rounds to collect the completed paper copies, which gave me another 50% of the survey data that I needed for analysis. An interesting research project would be a time-and-motion study to investigate the direct and indirect costs involved engaging in the data collection processes in person versus online, also measuring the relational capital gains and losses, and would have to include a component that includes the “flourishing at work” experiences of both the school stakeholders and researchers.

Another observation was how uncoordinated tertiary research projects are in terms of the schools (or other institutions) that are targeted to be participants in such research. I made contact with schools that had indicated that I was the third and fourth researcher asking to do research in some of these schools in the same period of time. I am wondering whether there is value in having a central research point that indicates who is researching on topics and in different areas and to guard against over-surveying schools. These ruminations are given as examples of the opportunity that can lie in the midst of chaos. Our challenge is to know and to make a difference where we can.

PhD Student: Elné Visagie

Elné Visagie recently embarked on her PhD journey. She is guided and supported by her supervisor Prof. Elmarie Deacon and co-supervisor, Dr Rumando Kok. Elné completed her Masters in Psychology at the North-West University. Her master's research focused on the social support experiences of adults with Type 1 Diabetes. This research was published in the Journal of Psychology in Africa in 2018.

Elné has been practising in Johannesburg for the past three years as a psychologist. She has a passion for nutrition and men-

tal, physical, and emotional well-being. This, in combination with her interest in diabetes has led to a focus on Type 2 diabetes for her current study. Her PhD study will focus on developing CBT informed guidelines that healthcare practitioners can use to improve the self-management practices of individuals with type 2 diabetes. The self-management of type 2 diabetes is deemed quite challenging as the lifestyle adjustments and management demands can lead to various physical, mental, and emotional challenges. The CBT guidelines can provide a



Elné Visagie

framework that focuses on the self-management challenges and facilitate improved management practices through changing thoughts, behaviours, and emotional processing.

PhD Student: Sylvia Kruger

Sylvia Kruger is a Counselling psychologist working in private practice, based in Potchefstroom. Living with type 1 diabetes and as a psychologist, she is passionate about the field of diabetes and psychology. Her master's study had a focus on the meaning-making of young women living with type 1 diabetes and it was found that initially the diabetes diagnosis is an experience of distress, however over time it

becomes a journey of growth and newfound strengths. She is currently a first year PhD student at Optentia. The focus of her PhD study will be the development of a positive psychology intervention programme for adolescents living with type 1 diabetes who are using closed loop technology, under the guidance of Prof. Elmarie Deacon and Prof. Esmé van Rensburg. Her hope is that her research will make an impact on the field of



Sylvia Kruger

diabetes and for those who are living with diabetes.

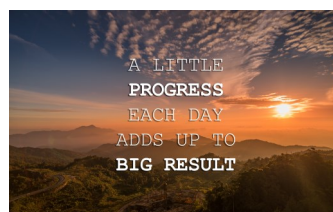
“The CBT guidelines can provide a framework that focuses on self-management challenges...”

Internationalisation and Diversity

Optentia is proud of the diversity of participants in the research unit. We are collaborating with researchers and students from South and North America, Africa, Europe and Asia. Dr Jeniboy Kimpah, post-doctoral fellow from Malaysia arrived in Vanderbijlpark in June 2021, and Um I Lela of Pakistan hopes to join us soon. This year PhD students from Zambia (Andrew Banda) and Ja-

maica (Henry Lewis) started their PhD studies at Optentia. Annelisa Murangi and Coen Welsh from Namibia started their PhD studies in 2020 and are making very good progress. In June 2021, Dr Nereide Alhena from Italy was appointed as an extraordinary researcher in Optentia. Prof. Ian Rothmann and Dr Mai Helmy of Menoufia University in Egypt is also working on plans to collabo-

rate in research projects. We want to express our gratitude to all our extraordinary researchers from South Africa and worldwide who collaborate with us!



My PhD Experience: Data Collection during the COVID-19

My study looks at “optimal functioning of special education teachers in Namibia: the effects of constraints, resources and capabilities”. The study was granted ethical clearance last year in August 2020, however due the rising covid 19 cases in Namibia, I had to put the process of collecting data on hold. It was in February 2021 that I started collecting data up to date. This process continues to teach lessons that I wish to share with you:

- Use the journey to learn more about yourself in relation to your PhD. The answer to “Who am I in relation to my research topic” is important at any stage in the data collection phase.
- In this trying times, it is sometimes difficult to get even just 50 participants for your online survey or posted questionnaires. It is important to understand that even for participants, times are as well trying and calls for strategies that are different. Have you exhausted

strategy A or B in your efforts to get the required sample? Take some time to reflect with your support network (other PhD students, your supervisor, and your colleagues) on how best to possibly proceed. There will always be a PLAN C.

- Look forward to the day you will get the required sample (I’m at 137 participants and need a few more to 200). Dream about it, imagine it more than you imagine the opposite. Remember your research is worth doing, with everything in you, to the best of your ability because it is for a GOOD CAUSE.
- Always update your supervisor about what’s happening at every stage of data collection. When you are quiet, they can only assume you are doing well. Uphold your academic integrity at all times. Start well and end well with no compromise of ethical principles.
- Lastly, it is really okay to have no strength in you, to



Annelisa Murangi

feel you are not making progress, to feel no one understands research or is passionate about what you are researching on. I call this the time out phase where you go back to that one or two reasons why you started this journey in the first place. After that you enter into a re-boost phase. If the cycle has to continue until you finish the process, it is still okay. It stretches your ability to adapt, your ability to identify where you are emotionally, psychologically, physically at every stage of the data collection phase because only then will you know how to take care of yourself WELL.

“Who am I in relation to my research topic...”

Five Practical Steps towards Inclusive Ecology Studies

We live in a vast world of knowledge and yet many scientific fields predominantly emphasise the contributions of Western knowledge. The importance of decolonising ecology to broaden the reach and impact of the field in an ethical way is the topic of a paper that an anthropologist from the North-West University has co-authored for the 17 May 2021 edition of the publication, Nature, Ecology and Evolution.

Dr Jess Auerbach worked with Dr Christopher H. Trisos of the University of Cape Town and Dr Madhusudan Katti of the North Carolina State University on the paper, “Decoloniality and anti-oppressive practices for a more ethical ecology”. “It is essential to make the discipline more inclusive, creative and ethical. There are many ways of knowing and doing ecology, and this needs to be acknowledged,” says Dr

Jess, who aims to develop a top postgraduate programme in anthropology at the NWU. Click [here](#) to read more.

Living my PhD: Becoming a Researcher *by* Carol-Ann Dixon

When I registered to “do” my PhD earlier this year I was aware of some ambivalence about my decision. I was terrified that soon the truth that I was not actually clever enough would be revealed, and at the same time I was curious and energized by the idea of learning and being back in the unfamiliar yet alluring world of academia.

A few months down the line I have realized that you don’t “do” a PhD, you live it! In fact, as my supervisors teased me – your PhD travels with you wherever you go! This has proved true in so many ways as we zoomed through proposal review meetings, even from the back seat of our Combi whilst travelling with my husband.

As I critically reflect on my journey thus far of “living and travelling with” my PhD, I realise that a PhD is much more than exploring a topic and contributing meaningfully to the scientific body of knowledge. I am discovering that the development of knowledge and my understanding of what counts as knowledge is entangled with the development of myself as a person and as a researcher. The journey of my becoming a researcher began many years ago with a sense of wonder and the development of a liberating new skill at the age of three years old. Then my curiosity in the world around me was embodied in one heartfelt question: “but why?”. This attempt at critical reflection was not met with the same encouragement as I now experience with my PhD mentors! Sadly, my authentic expression of natural curiosity was mostly dismissed with confusing and unsatisfying answers



Camping in Snowdonia, Wales

like “because I said so” or limited storylines and un-examined responses of so-called truth!

My innocent curiosity-driven attempts to explore the unknown and trouble the world went shamefully underground. Now the experience of critical reflection to the study of knowledge has re-awakened my dormant “inner researcher” as I apply my mind to my work and relationships. I am loving asking questions – why, for whom, how and in what context. I am loving discovering a few answers, some contradictions and am surprisingly energized by the many unknowns. Curiosity is connected to desire and is defined by Baumgarten (2001) as a virtue, and by Klevan “as a force that propels the troubling of existing knowledge and enables an expansion of knowledge. In its implicit desire to question and expand, curiosity adheres to an understanding of the world and knowledge as becoming” (2019, p. 1250). Through curiosity we connect with the world and others, and when this virtuous force is welcomed, we flourish and are transformed. I feel as if I have been awakened

from a deep slumber and triggered into attentiveness, beckoned to experience new encounters and engage in diverse dialogues. The PhD journey can be dark, mystifying, long and arduous, and at the mastery of each pinnacle, new exciting vistas open to unexpected windows on the world. I am not “doing” this PhD, I am living it, and loving it!

Carol-Ann Dixon is registered for a PhD in Relational Dynamics and Development

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“I am not ‘doing’ this PhD, I am living it, and loving it!”

Community Needs, Challenges and Assets in Taung

Apart from being famous as the site where the Taung skull was discovered in 1924, Taung has seen several recent developments, turning it into an ever more vibrant community. However, much remains unknown about how the needs, challenges and assets in the broader Taung community may have changed over the past ten years. Prof. Werner Nell and Prof. Hendri Coetzee are currently conducting a qualitative study in Taung to explore this. This study forms part of a broader study of the regional history of this community, which Prof. Elize van Eeden initiated. They have already completed their fieldwork during a one-week visit to the region in April. They conducted semi-structured interviews with several key community stakeholders who represent various spheres of community life. Preliminary findings suggest that the two biggest challenges plaguing community members are unemployment and infrastructure problems, particularly poor quality roads that become unnavigable during the rainy season and greatly disrupt community activities as residents are unable to travel to work or school. Yet the findings also indicate that these and other problems are offset by social support networks, a strong community spirit of Ubuntu, and recent improvements to infrastructure. These include new school buildings, bridges, fences to curtail stock theft, and a newly built town mall. However, due to a complex network of interrelationships between various aspects of the community, the erection of the mall sparked the development of a bustling transit node and

“... the two biggest challenges plaguing community members are unemployment and infrastructure problems.”



Prof. Werner Nell



The Taung Dam



The Taung Mall

increased formal and informal employment. Ironically, this commercialisation also serves to undermine many small-scale local economic initiatives and accelerate the influx of dangerous narcotics such as nyaophe into the local community. Findings from the study will be shared with local government and com-

munity leadership to support decision making, policy development, and the alignment and prioritisation of future interventions and community engagement initiatives in accordance with the needs and challenges experienced by the community.

When the Sun Goes Down, There Must be a Sunrise

When COVID-19 hit the planet, we experienced various challenges. In Malaysia, the government enforced a travel ban, which prevented all Malaysians from crossing international borders. Lockdowns in Malaysia and South Africa started just when I was ready to depart for South Africa. I felt depressed, lonely, and disappointed because I could not travel to South Africa to start my postdoctoral journey at the North-West University.

When the sun goes down, there must be a sunrise. One year later, in April 2021, my visa application was approved. I was thrilled when I found out that I was eligible to receive the COVID-19 vaccine. Scholars involved in research outside Malaysia are eligible to have two doses of the COVID-19 vaccine. After each vaccination, my left arm felt uncomfortable for a week. I also experienced a fever, a slightly sore throat, and nasal congestion after the vaccination. Those side effects were to be expected, as my body was building up protection against the virus. I had already prepared for discomfort before the vaccination day, and luckily, painkillers got me through the pain and fever following the vaccination. Since having been vaccinated, I still avoid public places, wear a mask all the time, maintain a social distance, and avoid poorly ventilated places. Also, I wash my hands frequently. Looking back, I think that the experience of the discomfort of vaccination was better than the trauma of ending up in a hospital with COVID-19.

I received a negative RT-PCR test and my digital vaccination certificate, travel pass letter, travel permit, insurance, and airline ticket. In addition, I prepared all documents required by the Malaysian authority to cross the international border and exit Malaysia. All



Dr Jeniboy Kimpah (postdoctoral fellow in Optentia) and Prof. Ian Rothmann

the processes had to be managed online, often with only my mobile phone. I left behind 19 adorable cats to start a new journey and experience sunrise in Vanderbijlpark. I became a responsible traveller.

There are a few things one should be aware of when travelling in the new normal. The place travellers will visit most frequently is the airport. The airport is a bridge for travel to other countries. A lot of human behaviours can increase the risk of spreading the virus. Therefore, travellers should wear a mask, sanitise their hands, and avoid crowded places. I could see that not all passengers were wearing masks and practising social distancing at the airport.

I arrived safely in Vanderbijlpark, and a new life is just beginning. Currently, my main concerns are the weather and the cost of living in Vanderbijlpark. The cost of living in South Africa is higher than in Malaysia, and I must budget well. Where I live in Malaysia, it is always summer, and it rains all year. Suddenly, I must deal with a new environment with a cold and dry winter season. I must optimise my skills to “adapt and

adopt” to ensure my physical and mental well-being in a new environment.

Dr Jeniboy Kimpah completed a PhD in Human Resource Management at the [University of Science, Malaysia](#). The title of his thesis was: The effect of participative decision-making and empowerment on job performance of engineers in Electric and Electronic sectors. The study examined the effect of participative decision-making, psychological empowerment and environmental empowerment on in-role performance and creative performance. This research employed a matched pair approach in examining the perspective of managers on their engineers’ performance.

“When the sun goes down, there must be a sunrise.”

Workshop on Critical Realism *by* Prof. Vera Roos

We took advantage of the opportunities presented by the pandemic to engage with international experts online. Through support of the research office of the North-West University, Prof. Alex Clark was invited to present a two-day workshop on critical realism. Alex is Associate Vice-President (Research) and Professor at the University of Alberta and a World Economic Forum Young Global Leader.

Critical realism as a meta-theoretical framework posits the existence of a social reality that is mind-independent. It informs research on complex social phenomenon where many factors are involved and every situation is unique. A critical realist approach is particularly useful in the evaluation of programmes or interventions to determine what works for whom and in what contexts. In order to understand the outcomes of a programme or intervention and to explain the outcomes, there has to be a

“A critical realist approach is particularly useful in the evaluation of programmes or interventions...”



Participants in the workshop on Critical Realism

deeper understanding of the particular context in relation to interplay. The workshops were attended by Optentia’s members and post-graduate students.

Bodydynamic: A primer to 7 Character Structures *by* Prof. Vera Roos

For six weeks, a group of people interested in creating optimal relationships attended introductory presentations of Sarah Cornish from Italy on the seven character structures of bodydynamic. Sarah is a craniosacral therapist and somatic experiencing practitioner who recently also completed a course in Bodydynamic. The Bodydynamic – Somatic Psychology and Analysis System – is a pioneering method of somatic developmental psychology and psychotherapy that integrates current research in the psychomotor development of



Sarah Cornish, Vera Roos, Mariaan Uys, Carol-Ann Dixon, Johanri Engelbrecht, Sonia Kruger and Jeanie Gavé (absent when the screen shot was taken)

children, cognitive and depth psychotherapy, brain research, and special emphasis on the quality of contact and on healthy relationships. Click [here](#) for more information.

Initiating a Community of Practice for Academic Integrity at the NWU

The School of Philosophy, in partnership with the journal *Transformation in Higher Education*, recently hosted the 2021 Annual North-West University Forum entitled *Cheating, dishonesty and plagiarism with online TL*. What are the students saying? Can we fundamentally change it? This webinar formed part of the Humanities Faculty Curriculum Conversations Seminar Series. As an extension of this opportunity, we recognised that there is a need to engage in critical conversations regarding this dominant discourse in the higher education (HE) online landscape, where a holistic and multidisciplinary approach is called for. As Professor Robert Balfour stated during the forum “Academic misconduct is surely both a provocative and controversial topic but a critical feature of academic practice. Unwelcomed as academic misconduct might be and difficult to discuss, let alone evaluate.”

Going beyond academic misconduct, we invited NWU academics and support staff during June 2021 to become part of an initial conversation where we aspired to establish a Community of Practice (CoP) that will focus on academic integrity at NWU. In defining a CoP, it is worthwhile to consider what the term CoP means in the real sense of its purpose. The term CoP was coined to refer to the community that acts as a living curriculum for the apprentice. The concept has turned out to provide a useful perspective on knowing and learning and serves as a key to improving performance. For CoPs to exist, three elements are required and include domain, community, and practice. A CoP has an identity defined by a shared domain of interest where members of this community form relationships, engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other, share

information, and learn from one another and together. They are practitioners that develop a shared repertoire of resources. “Communities of practice provide a new model for connecting educators in the spirit of learning, knowledge sharing, and collaboration” ~ Cambridge, Kaplan & Suter (2005).

As part of our first CoP, engaging in initial voluntary and spontaneous conversations, Prof Petro du Preez (Professor of Curriculum Studies, Philosophy and Research Methodology at the Faculty of Education of the North-West University) introduced Appreciative Inquiry as a research methodology that could facilitate the success of a CoP, with a focus on producing research outputs enabled through dialogue between people who come together to explore new possibilities, solve challenging problems, and create new, mutually beneficial opportunities. By following this approach, the CoP could provide a shared context for people to communicate and share information, stories and personal experiences in a way that builds understanding and insight. It is therefore important for the COPAI to benefit from invaluable academic conversations, scholarly contributions, and disciplinary expertise through a multidisciplinary perspective. These would enable us to reach actionable insights in creating a teaching and learning environment



Prof. Anne Verhoef



Dr Mariette Fourie

evident of academics and students with integrity, and ultimately quality teaching and learning at NWU.

This CoP will be driven from the Centre for Teaching and Learning, and the Quality Enhancement Office at NWU, across all eight faculties and three campuses, where Professor Anné Verhoef will fulfill a leading role. The approach attempts to also engage all management levels in Faculties, as well as all Support Departments at NWU. This is the birth of a coherent and cohesive vision for academic integrity at NWU, and the beginning of a long-term project in which we will strive to diversify and grow.

We further extend this invitation to colleagues at NWU to become part of this multidisciplinary forum. Be on the lookout for our CoPAI website and forthcoming communication. For more information, do not hesitate to contact us at anne.verhoef@nwu.ac.za or mariette.fourie@nwu.ac.za. We are looking forward with great anticipation to your involvement and collaboration!

“Communities of practice provide a new model for connecting educators in the spirit of learning, knowledge sharing, and collaboration ...”



Dr Mariette Fourie appointed as a NWU Quality Manager

It is an honour to share my knowledge, skills, and experience as Quality Manager: Academic Programmes at NWU from 1 July 2021. I have visualised my vision for academic quality at NWU by means of the four approaches inclusive of (i) cohesion & coherence; (ii) growth & sustainability; (iii) my visionary role; and (iv) synchronicity. My aspirations to efficaciously contribute to the quality of teaching and learning at the institution is evident from my career trajectory, set goals, and commitment in Higher Education (HE). I regard myself as a critical realist, mapping the ontological character of social reality. My professional character portrays a strong disposition towards social justice and transformation in HE. In framing my vision for academic quality in HE, and particularly at NWU, I acknowledge contextual shifts, as well as the dominant discourses in HE e.g. globalisation, democratisation, massification, marketisation, amongst others, that influence academic quality.

HE Institutions are becoming a major driver of economic competitiveness in an increasingly knowledge-driven global economy. Some tensions in HE refer to the accountability versus improvement of HE; the public accountability and institutional autonomy (especially evident in traditional universities); the relationship between the state and HE (autonomy – how much can we do what we want to do whilst receiving funding from the state); quality as ideology (fitting ourselves into an ideological box not seeing and acknowledging blind spots); and taking a purely instrumental view of HE where we care only about market value, productivity, performance and efficiency that has a tension against the traditional understandings of the purpose of HE.

Traditionally and prior to the national intervention, the quality or excellence of people in HE ensured the quality of knowledge production.

My Vision for Academic Quality



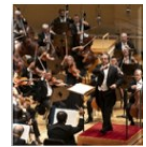
Cohesion and Coherence



Growth and Sustainability



My Visionary Role



Synchronicity

Traditional quality practices were based on norms and values of the academic community and on the assumption that quality is self-evident. The meaning of quality remained implicit. Where we find ourselves now in HE, we need to ask what the difference is between quality and quality assurance, and does quality actually lead to quality assurance?

Vroeijenstijn (1995) emphasises the importance of context, because education is a context-dependent social practice (always involves people), the definition of quality gets determined based on ideology and politics rather than on educational principles. What are the educational principles informing quality in HE? Quality assurance is about process, whereas quality is about intellectual innovation. If we are serious about having a high-quality higher education system, then we must start asking questions about enhancement, avoiding the risk of suggesting that there is one standard way of measuring this. Quality is multi-dimensional and signified even more by the fact that “not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted” (Cameron, 1963, p. 13).

Controversial terms related to the quality phenomenon in HE refers to fitness for purpose (how is the core business of the university aligned with its institutional vision and mission) and fitness of purpose (the ability to respond to national imperatives, how responsive are the university to the social and economic needs of society). Fitness of pur-

pose further refers to the purposes of education in HE – it refers to transformation of individuals, the development needs of society, developing critical citizens, and knowledge creation, with the focus on social justice and democratic imperatives, equality, redress, quality, effectiveness/efficiency, global vs local responsiveness, and the provision of formal and epistemological access (student access with success). The South African HEQC defines quality as fitness for purpose, value for money and transformation, within an overarching fitness of purpose framework. Through its emphasis on “fitness of purpose”, the HEQC indicates that it will evaluate the quality of academic programmes and the effectiveness and adequacy of institutional quality management systems in terms of their contribution to the transformative goals of the national higher education policy context.



Dr Mariette Fourie

“Higher education institutions are becoming a major driver of economic competitiveness in an increasingly knowledge-driven global economy.”

Dr Mariette Fourie appointed as a NWU Quality Manager

The most widely accepted criterion of quality in higher education is probably “fitness for purpose”. HE is still busy understanding what fitness of purpose means for the South African context. Once we establish this, we can design instruments to measure fitness of purpose. What values, beliefs, ideologies do we need to inform fitness of purpose for HE in SA and specifically at NWU? The culture of an institution is embedded in these values, beliefs, and ideologies. Furthermore, what quality culture prevails in NWU? Particularly in the ambit of remote online teaching and learning, we must rethink quality of teaching and learning, the way we provide opportunities for learning to our students. Teaching online is causing a ‘pedagogical renaissance’ in reflecting upon ways to emphasise the importance of a sound philosophical and pedagogical foundation for one’s teaching practice. Our ontological and epistemological beliefs influence our pedagogy, and the way we provide epistemological access to the discipline, how we teach, and how we assess.

An institutional quality culture in higher education usually consists of two interdependent components, namely: shared values, beliefs, expectations, and commitment towards quality; and a pro-active and focused institutional approach to quality assurance and enhancement in all areas.

The South African project, most remarkably, found that the nature of the interface between these two components - the extent of alignment and synergy between the institutional quality approach and shared staff values, beliefs and expectations - lies at the heart of the establishment and perpetuation of an institutional quality ethos. Literature also highlights the importance of collecting and giving a prominent place to feedback from students on quality issues.

Changing the quality culture at NWU implies amongst others, that we have to engage in a quality review pro-

cesses that foster critical self-reflection in changing the behaviour engaging in reviews from not only compliance driven, but towards quality enhancement and continuous improvement with an emphasis on professional development and an ethics of care. We must develop a quality identity across faculties and campuses, where creating synergy and collaboration between support departments and faculties are critical. Robust data management and analysis of Internal Programme Evaluation (IPE) data must be linked with the academic governance of NWU through the provisions of the NWU Annual Performance Plan. A further consideration refers to the online development of quality assurance and enhancement processes at NWU. We must innovatively create and transform the e-learning environment to a more friendly and less intimidating environment in the context of quality support. The idea to develop an online IPE review process possibly across three campuses is a priority, as well as optimization of integrated support through a one-stop data warehouse which can ease relevant data access from student registration, participation, to throughput rates.

The NWU acknowledges that quality is multidimensional and contextual. Quality entails fitness for purpose and fitness of purpose. The transformation agenda specifically entails that Quality Assurance is a means of ensuring high quality teaching and learning opportunities for all students and efficiency, effectiveness, equity, and responsiveness. The purpose of a quality assurance system is to demonstrate alignment to overarching standards and to develop an efficient, sustainable process for systematic valuation/review/assessment by means of a variety of instruments. Awareness is not enough. Actionable insights for quality enhancement need to be recognised in the light of dominant discourses in HE.

Quality is a prerequisite to equip students with the knowledge, skills, and competencies that they need to be able to efficaciously, and with confidence, operate in any given knowledge society. Graduates should be able to work with and integrate knowledge. Furthermore, HE assessment systems must ensure that graduates accumulate these competences that they need to be successful after graduation. The quality of teaching and learning and subsequently the quality of qualifications at any HE institution, is an integral part of the core business of the university due to its accountability to various stakeholders. HE must provide quality education and training to develop the skills and innovations necessary for national development and successful participation in the global economy.

As HE systems grow and diversify, society is increasingly concerned about the quality of programmes. Quality teaching must be thought of dynamically, in light of contextual shifts in the HE environment. Transnational education is not going to disappear while an enormous demand for learning and qualifications goes unmet in the developing world. I conclude with this statement by Brenda Leibowitz (2009): Master teachers are not born; they become. They become primarily by developing a habit of mind, a way of looking critically at the work they do; by developing the courage to recognise faults, and by struggling to improve.

Under the leadership of the Quality Director and in collaboration with the team, I will fulfil my role as Quality Manager: Academic Programmes to fulfil the true essence of quality in HE as fitness for purpose, value for money and transformation, within an overarching fitness of purpose framework as espoused by the HEQC.

“Teaching online is causing a pedagogical renaissance...”

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For a worthwhile existence



Books

- Alexandrova, A. (2017). A philosophy for the science of well-being. Oxford University Press.
- Bentley, J., & Toth, M. (2020). Exploring wicked problems. Archway Publishing.
- Claassen, R. Capabilities in a just society: A theory of navigational agency. Cambridge University Press.
- Clifton, J., & Harter, J. (2021). Wellbeing at work: How to build resilient and thriving teams. Gallup.
- Kahneman, D., Sibone, D., & Sunstein, C.R. (2021). Noise: A flaw in human judgement. William Collins.
- Lawler, E.E. (2017). Reinventing talent management: Principles and practices for the new world of work. Berrett-Koehler Publishers..

Upcoming Events (Click [here](#) to go to the Optentia Research Calendar)

We're on the web!
www.optentia.co.za