

Special points of interest:

- * Consider a balanced approach to life crafting.
- * Inclusive institutions and decolonisation drive prosperity.
- * Prof. Ruut Veenhoven, the happiness professor has died.
- * Optentia invests in artificial intelligence tools for researchers..
- * Optentia plays a key role in reducing digital gaps.
- * Focus research on global unity.

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Life Crafting: Paths to Flourishing

Optentia participants recently engaged in a transformative life crafting workshop led by experts such as Profs. Bryan Dik, Bradley Wright, and Llewellyn van Zyl. Life crafting encourages individuals to clarify their values, set meaningful goals, and proactively shape their lives. Prof. Dik emphasised the importance of transitioning from reactive to proactive living, while Prof. Wright highlighted the role of crafting in aligning with one's purpose. Prof. van Zyl introduced diverse life crafting strategies. (Watch the video about life crafting [here](#).) Unfortunately, life crafting might emphasise individual agency and underestimate structural barriers (such as socioeconomic status, systemic inequalities, or conventions) that shape opportunities and choices, overemphasise individual responsibility, and ignore collective and relational dynamics. Life crafting should be expanded to include contextual factors, recognising the interplay between individuals and their environments by a) incorporating the capability approach (by focusing on real opportunities to achieve what individuals value, and acknowledging how social, economic, and institutional factors enable or constrain life crafting efforts); b) designing life crafting interventions that are culturally sensitive, taking into account conventions in diverse settings; c) focussing on systemic



reforms to improve access to education, employment, and resources, and d) strengthening relational dynamics by incorporating family, community, or workplace-based life crafting activities to emphasise interdependence and collective growth. Integrating these elements transforms life crafting into a balanced framework that empowers individuals and acknowledges the socio-political systems influencing them.

Paths to flourishing, as explored by leading authors, emphasise individual agency, systemic support, and institutional reform. Richard E. [Boyatzis](#) (2024) highlights the Intentional Change Theory, which empowers individuals and organisations to achieve growth through positive emotional attractors, supportive relationships, and purposeful transformation. Michael [Ungar](#) (2024) reframes resilience as a balance between personal agency and systemic influences, advocating for robust social struc-

tures and embracing failure as a path to adaptability. Corey [Keyes](#) (2024) advocates for self-acceptance, meaningful relationships, and purposeful activities to transition from stagnation to flourishing. William [Damon](#) (2008) points to the importance of mentorship and environments that guide people toward values-driven goals, fostering intrinsic motivation and long-term fulfilment. [Acemoglu](#), Johnson, and Robinson extend flourishing to a societal level, demonstrating how inclusive institutions and decolonisation drive prosperity. They argue that nations thrive through reforms prioritising collective well-being over elite interests.

A balanced approach to life crafting ensures that individuals are empowered to pursue personal goals while recognising and addressing contextual influences. It will be worthwhile to investigate the balanced approach to life crafting.

Optentia's Performance: Key insights

Optentia has 24 primary participants and 15 secondary participants; 45 extraordinary professors, 9 extraordinary researchers and one professor of practice. Optentia researchers have published 97.83 peer-reviewed articles, peer-reviewed chapters in books, and peer-reviewed conference papers from January to December 2024.



"Optentia researchers have published 97.83 peer-reviewed articles and peer-reviewed chapters in books from January to December 2024."

- **Field-weighted citation impact (FWCI):** The FWCI of Optentia (2019-2024) is 2.25. Publications were cited 125% more often than the global average. The median FWCI (73 researchers) was 1.03.
 - **Citations in the top 10% citations percentile:** Optentia has 26.3% of its outputs in the top 10% citation profiles.
 - **International collaboration:** Optentia has 71.9% international participation, it means that nearly three-quarters of its research outputs involve collaboration with researchers, institutions, or entities outside South Africa.
 - **Prominence percentile.** The prominence percentile for topics such as psychological resilience, mental health, intrinsic motivation, job crafting and employee engagement was 99.
- An article by Van Zyl et al. (2024) had the highest FWCI (66.39), which is excellent given that the article was published in 2024.

The Optentia Scorecard by Prof. Ian Rothmann

Output	2022	2023	2024
Peer-reviewed article equivalents	98.09	67.40*	97.83*
Papers: Conferences	9	27	10
Participating Master's students	34	63	77
Completed Master's students	23	5	18 (11)
Participating PhD students	52	50	39 (14)
Completed PhD students	6	10	10 (4)
Post-doctoral fellows	1	2	0
Number of workshops presented	10	19	11
Number of workshop participants	250	619 (222)	550

Note: Statistics on 12 December 2024

* Not audited

Optentia's Strategy for 2025

Optentia researchers participated in a planning session on 5 December 2024. We identified the following strategies for 2025:

- Undertake collaborative research projects aimed at quality.
- Develop the capabilities of emerging researchers, master's and PhD students, and established researchers, and implement strategies to retain a core group of successful, effective, and flourishing established researchers.
- Deliver quality master's and PhD programmes and research.
- Ensure proper funding for research projects through national and international partnerships.
- Internationalise with African and South African relevance and application.
- Ensure a sustainable research entity.



Optentia participants met on 5 December 2024 at Mongena Lodge to plan strategic priorities for 2025

- Develop and maintain technology-supported teaching and learning, research, and community engagement.
- Market and disseminate knowledge gained from research.
- Obtain and use resources, structures, and technology optimally and strategically.

Watch out for Optentia's one-stop methods and writing workshops for staff and postgraduate students in 2025. The focus of these workshops will be on capability development. Also, take note of the International Federation of Ageing Conference in September 2025.

"Optentia aim is to be a sustainable research entity."

Optentia Spotlight: Breaking News & Updates

It is with sadness that we acknowledge the passing of Prof. Ruut Veenhoven, an extraordinary professor in Optentia, and a pioneer in the field of happiness studies on 9 December 2024. Ruut's groundbreaking work in understanding and promoting human well-being has left an indelible mark on academia and beyond. We extend our condolences to his family, friends, and colleagues during this difficult time. His legacy will inspire and guide those of us dedicated to fostering flourishing in our communities. Click [here](#) to read more about Ruut's work. Watch a video about his work [here](#).

- Utilise the opportunity to do a free course on Mplus. Click [here](#) for access.
- A video-recorded training programme in scoping and systematic reviews is available on the [Optentia](#) website. Contact Lynn Booysen to access the training material.
- A Student's Guide to Writing with ChatGPT. Click [here](#) to watch the slides.
- Zotero is a free, easy-to-use tool to help you collect, organize, annotate, cite, and share research. Download Zotero [here](#).
- Use [AS Review](#) for reviews of the literature.
- We encourage researchers to register for the [free R course](#) that is presented by QuantFish. Also visit the site of [Prof. Deon de Bruin](#) (Stellenbosch University) to learn statistics in R.
- The SA Human Rights Commission invited Prof. J. Hoffman to serve as an Expert member of the Section 11 committee focusing on the rights of older persons.
- Optentia has invested in 20 licences for Elicit AI, which will provide support for literature reviews.

A Transformative Workshop on Holistic Life Crafting

A two-day workshop held on November 13-14, 2024, at Mongena Private Game Reserve aimed to help professionals equip individuals with tools to craft purposeful, meaningful lives. Titled The Holistic Life Crafting Model: A Practitioner's Guide to Meaning-Making in Every Domain, the event brought together experts in positive psychology to introduce participants to this innovative framework.

Facilitated by Prof. Bryan Dik (Colorado State University, USA), Prof. Bradley Wright (University of Connecticut, USA), and Prof. Llewellyn van Zyl (Psynalytics, Netherlands), the workshop targeted psychologists, managers, and coaches seeking to deepen their ability to foster personal growth and well-being.

The Holistic Life Crafting Model empowers individuals to align their lives with core values, strengths, and passions. Unlike passive approaches to personal growth, life crafting allows individuals to actively shape their environments and actions, ensuring they resonate with their deepest aspirations. The model covers seven key domains: cognitive, environmental, interest, relational, skill, task, and goal crafting. By engaging with these areas, individuals can create more purposeful and fulfilling lives.

Participants gained both theoretical insights and practical skills for applying life crafting in real-world contexts. They learned how to assess crafting habits, create personalized interventions, and adapt life crafting strategies for coaching, group settings, and organizational environments. By the end of the workshop, attendees were



Prof. Bradley Wright, Prof. Bryan Dik, Prof. Ian Rothmann and Prof. Llewellyn van Zyl

equipped to help others design more meaningful lives, enhancing both personal and professional growth.

The model offers numerous benefits, including increased motivation, resilience, and well-being. For organizations, it promotes higher employee engagement, job satisfaction, and performance, while reducing burnout and fostering innovation. Life

crafting helps cultivate positive organisational cultures by empowering individuals to take control of their careers.

As one participant, Hardus van Pletzen, shared, "This process provides a guiding vehicle and time to reflect... a worthwhile investment in well-being."

Click [here](#) to watch the video about the holistic life crafting workshop.



Attendees of the holistic life crafting workshop

"... individuals can create more purposeful and fulfilling lives."

Tswala! Project Bridges the Digital Divide in Schools

A groundbreaking initiative aimed at closing the digital divide in schools across Africa is making significant strides. The project, named Tswala!—a SeTswana word meaning "closing"—seeks to bridge the gap between students, teachers, and the world by integrating digital tools into classrooms. Its goal is to transform education by providing students and teachers with the technology needed to engage in modern, interactive learning.

In 2023, the International Health Awareness Network (IHAN), in partnership with the Optentia Research Unit, donated R200,000 worth of Galaxy tablets to Eloff Primary School near Delmas. The donation was part of a larger effort to support the digital transformation of education and was co-created with input from the school's teachers. The tablets aim to help the school better equip its learners to engage with educational content, interact with one another, and connect with the wider world.

Building on the success of this pilot project, IHAN plans to expand the initiative to 100 schools across Africa. Many schools in the region still face significant challenges in accessing digital technology, with traditional teaching methods often being the norm. This project seeks to overcome those barriers by providing students and educators with essential digital tools.

In 2024, the initiative saw further collaboration as academics from the Faculty of Humanities and the Faculty of Education joined forces with IHAN's founder, Dr. Sorosh Roshan, and Secretary Leila Farshchian. The team

revisited Eloff Primary School to assess the impact of the tablets and expanded the program to other schools.

Among the new beneficiaries was Kamagugu Primary School in Mbombela, which specializes in educating children with significant disabilities. The school received tablets to enhance learning for its students. Additionally, Ntolo High School, located near Garakuwa, also benefited from the donation of tablets, improving the educational experience for students there. Destinata School in Meyerton, which caters to children with learning barriers, was provided with laptops to support specialized software for students with hearing difficulties. Ntolo High School's principal, Mr. S.J. Phillips, expressed his gratitude, saying, "I would like to extend our heartfelt thanks for your generous donation of tablets to our school. Your contribution has not only equipped our classrooms with valuable technology but has

also opened new doors of opportunity for our students. These tablets will transform the way our learners engage with education. With access to digital tools and resources, our students are now better equipped to explore interactive learning, enhance their skills, and stay connected in an increasingly digital world."

The future of the Tswala! project looks promising, with plans to distribute more technology to as many schools as possible across the country and continent. The initiative also aims to intensify support for the four schools that have already received gadgets. This project represents a vital step forward in ensuring that all students, regardless of location or background, have access to the digital tools needed to succeed in the modern world. Click [here](#) to watch a video produced at the Destinata School recently:

"The tablets aim to help the school better equip its learners to engage with educational content, interact with one another, and connect with the wider world."



Children at Eloff Primary School using tablets donated by IHAN

Cross-cultural Psychology: A Focus on Global Unity

Prof. Ype Poortinga, emeritus professor at Tilburg University and the University of Leuven, delivered an insightful lecture at the Optentia Research Unit at the Vanderbijlpark Campus. His talk, titled "Exploring the History of Cross-Cultural Psychology: The Primacy of Method over Theory," explored the evolution of research methods in cross-cultural psychology, emphasising their importance in understanding differences and similarities in behaviour.

A leading expert in the field, Prof. Poortinga highlighted how advancements in research methodology have allowed for a deeper understanding of the vast behavioural differences between populations over the past 50 years. However, he cautioned that cross-cultural psychology should shift its focus from merely identifying differences to exploring the commonalities that unite people worldwide.

"We've made great strides in understanding how populations vary, but we must also remember that we are all part of the same global community," said Prof. Poortinga. He referred to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals as a framework to address global challenges like inequality, poverty, and environmental sustainability. He called for cross-cultural psychology to prioritise these shared concerns, framing them as issues faced by "villagers in the global village."

Central to his lecture was the idea that identity is at the heart of cross-cultural psychological research. Prof. Poortinga argued that understanding how individuals perceive themselves and their place in the world offers more meaningful insights



Kelebogile Ramagaga, Prof. Blessed Ngwenya, Elizabeth Kriel, Prof. Ype Poortinga and Prof. Ian Rothmann

than merely observing differences in behaviour. He emphasised that cross-cultural psychology should focus on observable conventions and practices that guide people's lives across diverse contexts.

In discussing the future of the field, Poortinga urged for more rigorous study designs that ensure valid and meaningful comparisons. He explained that many perceived psychological differences between populations, such as countries, often diminish when research methodologies are refined, stressing the importance of construct equivalence and addressing biases in research.

Prof. Poortinga's lecture underscored the importance of embracing both diversity and shared humanity. By focusing on global interconnectedness and pressing challenges, he advocates for a collaborative approach in cross-cultural research—one that aims to build bridges rather than highlight differences. His insights provide a roadmap for cross-cultural psychology to contribute to a more sustainable world.

Watch a video interview featuring Prof. Ype Poortinga in conversation with Prof. Ian Rothmann. [here](#).

Note: In the video, Prof. Poortinga references Humpty Dumpty's assertion - "When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less" - to critique the ambiguous use of the term "culture" in cross-cultural psychology. He argues this undermines scientific precision and advocates shifting focus to universal human traits and group-specific characteristics, fostering a more rigorous, unified approach to addressing global challenges and understanding human behaviour. For an excellent academic conversation read the [original paper](#) of Prof. Poortinga, the replies of [Michael Bond](#) and [Peter Smith](#) and another reply by Prof. Poortinga.

"When I use a word, Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less."
From: *Through the Looking-Glass* by Lewis Carroll

A “Qualitative Research Festival” of Note *by* Prof. Marita Heyns

From 3 to 6 September 2024, Optentia hosted a groundbreaking event that redefined the concept of “festival” in the realm of extensive qualitative research training. The “Qualitative Research Festival”, conceived during a team-building event of the Strengths-Based Studies and Interventions programme, aimed to create a dynamic and inclusive platform for advancing diverse qualitative research perspectives and transformative practices. In support of this endeavour, we also showcased and celebrated the expertise of Optentia-affiliated researchers who have already made some (remarkable) progress towards more socially just, community-centred research.

The 4-day event, which was coordinated by Prof Heyns and hosted by The Roots conference venue in Potchefstroom, brought together researchers from all three campuses of the North-West University to benefit from the lectures and workshops offered and to participate in lively discussions about their implications and the way forward.

Optentia featured contributions from several affiliated researchers, including those from four of our extra-ordinary professors: Prof. Chris Wekerle from McMaster University, Canada; Prof. Linda Liebenberg from Dalhousie University, Canada; Prof. Linda Theron from the University of Pretoria; and Prof. Ansie Kitching from the University of the Western Cape. Together, they presented an exciting array of innovative research methodologies and methods, tools and techniques associated with qualitative research.



Members attending the training event from 3-6 September 2024 at The Roots Conference Venue in Potchefstroom

As a multidisciplinary endeavour, it included lectures and workshops from experts across various fields including, for example, Forensic Accountancy, Clinical-Industrial- and Community Psychology, Socio-legal Studies and Education. The initiative was designed as a capacity building event, empowering participants with specialist knowledge, skills and confidence as qualitative researchers. Attendees enjoyed ample opportunities for intellectual stimulation, critical reflection, being mentored, social interaction, and the establishment of new research networks.

One of many highlights of the week was a workshop focused on submitting manuscripts to prestigious journals such as *Child Abuse and Neglect* and *Child Protection and Practice*. Professors Wekerle and Theron provided valuable insights and strategies to help participants turn their aspirations into reality and increase their research impact. Both these professors are also experts in resilience research. Click [here](#) to learn about their views on the latest resilience research.

The event marked several significant milestones for Optentia. It was the first time that we offered a Continuing Professional Development (CPD) accredited training opportunity, allowing HPCSA-affiliated participants to earn 21 CPD points, including two points for ethics. Additionally, we secured HREC approved ethical clearance for a workshop led by Prof Marinda Neethling and Dr Tamlynn Jefferis, which focused on ethical considerations for doing community-based research. The results of the discussion will culminate in a research paper co-authored by all the participants.

The Qualitative Research Festival will be fondly remembered by all who attended, serving as both an important capacity-building event and a celebration of the achievements of Optentia-affiliated researchers. For more information, please watch a video about the event [here](#).

“One of many highlights of the week was a workshop focused on submitting manuscripts to prestigious journals.”

Academic Mentor and Mentee Short Courses: Three Cohorts

The mentorship and mentee journey in the year has been nothing short of extraordinary, marked by the great achievement of the programme's objectives. Throughout the three cohorts, the value of excellence in all endeavours shone through in the remarkable participation of each group, marked by their commitment and enthusiasm for their growth and development. Additionally meeting our colleagues from different campuses and faculties was the highlight of the programme as it allowed us the opportunity to connect, foster strong relationships and future plan of collaborating with them. Based on the feedback from participants, they expressed the appreciation for the professional growth the programme has facilitated. It plays a vital role in broadening their perspective, helping them develop new skills and insights. The support structure was commended with many noting its vital role in ensuring their success throughout the programme. This was evident in the increasing numbers across each cohort and the positive recommendations received. As a result, we are confident in stating that 59 mentors and 49 mentees, totaling 108 participants, were trained in 2024 across cohorts 1 to 3 from all faculties (see the graph below for reference), with cohort 4 currently underway.

"... we are excited to continue next year by starting with the pairing of mentors and mentees and training additional mentors to expand the pool within the university."

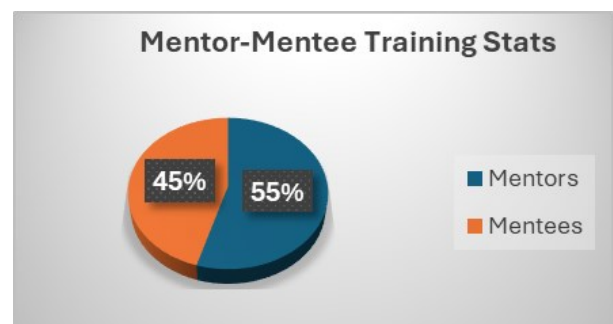
With the programme's success this year, we are excited to continue next year by starting with the pairing of mentors and mentees and training additional mentors to expand the pool within the university. We also aim to improve in areas where possible and adapt the programme to



Academic mentors and mentees in Cohort 1 and 2 who received their certificates



Academic mentors and mentees in Cohort 3 who received their certificates



support staff members. We look forward to further success next year with the support of the People and Culture department.

Watch a video of the learning experiences of academic mentees and mentors in Cohort 1 and 2 [here](#).

Watch a video of the learning experiences of academic mentees and mentors in Cohort 3 [here](#).

Prof. JT Janse van Rensburg: An Excellent Mentor

Enrolling in Optentia's academic mentorship course was a strategic decision to enrich the mentorship programme that I oversee, where IT graduates are paired with senior and executive-level mentors in the insurance industry. The course's theoretical focus allowed me to deeply reflect on various mentorship frameworks and methodologies, such as Boyatzis' Intentional Change Theory and the Human Potential Development Model, each adding fresh perspectives to the mentor-mentee dynamic.

One of the most valuable takeaways was understanding how structured mentorship programs can be crafted to foster both personal and professional growth. This includes implementing a comprehensive mentorship induction to unpack the requirements and value of the program, providing essential resources to



Prof. Ian Rothmann, Prof. JT Janse van Rensburg and Ms Kelebogile Ramagaga

both mentors and mentees, and ensuring continuous review of progress.

Learning how to connect the theory to the practical challenges our IT graduates face provided useful insights into shaping the kind of support they may need. The course's deep dives into mentorship theories not only fueled my passion for developing

young professionals but also reinforced the importance of my role as a graduate programme manager, where I coach and mentor young talent on a daily basis. Completing the course at my own pace made it manageable alongside my professional responsibilities, and I highly recommend it for both academics and non-academics alike.

"We are dedicated to enhancing our support by providing personalised guidance for each participant..."

Academic Mentor and Mentee Short Courses for 2025

Are you passionate about shaping the future of academia? Join our transformative short courses designed specifically for academic mentors and mentees. As a mentor, you will have the opportunity to guide and inspire the next generation of scholars, sharing your knowledge and experience. As a mentee, you'll receive invaluable support and insights to help you navigate your academic journey. These courses will equip you with essential skills for effective mentorship and a sustainable academic career, fostering a thriving and collaborative academic community. Don't miss this chance to be part of a program that emphasizes growth,

support, and excellence. Register now to embark on this rewarding path of mutual learning and development. Your future in academia begins here!

Click [here](#) to register for the academic mentoring short course. Click [here](#) to register for the academic mentee short course. Please contact Kelebogile Ramagaga, the course administrator for the short courses for mentors and mentees.

To access the Short Courses for Mentors and Mentees

- Go to www.optentia.co.za
- Click on Education
- Select Registered Short Courses
- Find the Short Courses for

Mentors and Mentees

- Access the Short Courses via the Optentia Glide homepage (<https://optentia.glide.page>). You will need a password to access the Short Courses.

Contact Kelebogile Ramagaga for more information about academic mentee and mentor training programmes.



Kelebogile Ramagaga

“Although she is nervous about the journey ahead, she is equally excited about the personal, professional, and academic growth this journey will bring.”

PhD in Social Sciences (Social Inclusion): Zama Kose

Zama's research journey began over eight years ago as a Master's research trainee at the Human Sciences Research Council, where she coordinated projects that integrated community-based approaches to HIV care across South Africa and beyond, while also enhancing her skills in research management.

Currently, as a Senior Manager at the Directorate for Research and Postgraduate Support at North-West University, she combines her passion for research with a focus on research administration. She supports faculties and researchers in navigating the university's research processes. Zama is eager to pursue a PhD to further develop her research management capabilities, expand her



Zama Kose

academic knowledge, and enhance her capacity to lead impactful, interdisciplinary research initiatives. Although she is nervous about the journey ahead, she is equally excited about the personal, professional, and aca-

demic growth this journey will bring. Zama look forward to being a part of the Optentia team! Prof. Ian Rothmann is the promoter of her study.

PhD in Social Sciences (Social Inclusion): Geraldine Meyers Mashamba

“Growing up in South Africa, I witnessed the persistent impact of unemployment on communities, which fuelled my passion for fostering social change.” Geraldine's life has been defined by a commitment to creating opportunities for those who are overlooked. This has shaped both her academic journey and professional endeavours, focusing on sustainable livelihoods and strategies to empower marginalised groups.

During her master's study, she explored how youth navigate unemployment through diverse livelihood strategies. This work deepened her understanding of structural barriers and inspired her PhD focus. As an Optentia-affiliated PhD candidate, she is excited to explore how on-demand services in the gig econ-



Geraldine Meyers Mashamba

omy can create sustainable livelihood opportunities in an inclusive manner. This research is a reflection of her life's purpose: to bridge systemic gaps and contribute to policies that promote social and economic inclusion, notwithstanding sustainable live-

lihoods. Through this programme, she hopes to deepen her understanding of systemic barriers while collaborating with like-minded researchers to propose solutions for social development. Her promoters are Prof. Ian Rothmann and Dr Neil Barnard.

PhD in Social Sciences (Social Inclusion): Lena-Mari Josling

Lena-Mari Josling is a proud South African, using every opportunity in life to make a lasting impact on the world, guided by her faith and altruism. Lena-Mari believes that all people face challenges regarding worth, acceptance, striving, purpose, and calling. Their experiences and frustrations propel us into these areas, creating a ripple effect of significance when the stone drops. Living on a Joseph Calling, the themes woven early into her life have been righteousness, leadership, development, the marketplace, and entrepreneurship. Born in Gauteng, she qualified as an Industrial Psychologist and navigated the married life and the challenges of motherhood with three super cool children, eventually relocating to Cape Town.



Lena-Mari Josling

Currently, she is the steward of a consultancy called Katzar, which means "to harvest." Blessed with many opportunities, amazing mentors, and a supportive family, she feels humbled to be part of the PhD programme at Optentia. She is eager to learn, grow, and share knowledge, while expanding

her network. Lena-Mari says: "The journey ahead excites me, and I am passionate about bringing my research to life, making a real impact on future entrepreneurs." Prof. Ian Rothmann and Dr Neil Barnard are the promoters of her study.

"The journey ahead excites me, and I am passionate about bringing my research to life, making a real impact on future entrepreneurs."

PhD in Social Sciences (Social Inclusion): Saskia Fern

Born and raised in Germany, Saskia knew from an early age that it was the human experience and behaviour that interested her the most, but she did not want to focus solely on the deficit states. Due to the loss of her mother, she got in touch with the question of what a good, fulfilled life is and how we can live it at a comparatively early age. These questions inevitably led her to positive psychology. In this wonderful field, she strives to make her contribution in answering these questions and promoting holistic well-being and flourishing both academically and practically.

One component that is often neglected in the consideration of well-being is spirituality which is where her PhD topic is located. Spirituality, viewed through the



Saskia Fern

lens of positive psychology, enriches our understanding of human flourishing and offers practical pathways to enhance well-being. As such, it is crucial area of research. In this PhD programme, she hopes to find like-

minded people, as well as sceptics, as the critical examination of one's own assumptions is what drives change and growth. Prof. Llewellyn van Zyl is the promoter of the study.

“Through the PhD in Social Sciences with a focus on Social Inclusion and Development at Optentia, she will explore how such networks enhance teachers’ resilience and effectiveness.”

PhD in Social Sciences (Social Inclusion): Judine van Aardt

For over a decade, Judine has worked as a mathematics educator, curriculum developer, and administrator in international schools. Spending nearly 10 years as an expat teacher in diverse cultural settings taught her how important community and belonging are in supporting teachers' well-being. These experiences shaped her belief that educators, who carry immense responsibility, need accessible systems of support to thrive in their roles.

Her purpose is to create frameworks that empower educators through networks for mental health, professional growth, and social adjustment. Through the PhD program in Social Sciences with a focus on Social Inclusion and Development at Optentia, she will explore how such networks enhance teachers' resilience and effectiveness.



Judine van Aardt

Her goal is to contribute practical, research-driven solutions that help educators globally feel supported and equipped to make a lasting impact, thus bridging theory and practice to inspire systemic change in education.

Prof. Marita Heyns is the promoter of the study.

PhD in Human Resource Management: Roslyn Lodewyk-Raliphada

Roslyn Lodewyk-Raliphada views herself as a very determined and optimistic person who loves to help people. She says that she knows what failure is. She has often experienced failure in her undergraduate studies and her career. Although she has experienced failure, she showed resilience and believes that her experiences formed her into the person she is today.

“Working hard is one of the aspects that are very close to my heart. I believe that working hard produces good fruits. One of my passions is working with young people. I believe that my GOD-given mandate and purpose is to complete my PhD to the best of my ability and make sure that the



Roslyn Lodewyk-Raliphada

community that I come from is impacted.” Prof. Ian Rothmann and Dr Neil Barnard are the promoters of her study.

PhD in Industrial Psychology: Karien Stadler

Karien Stadler describes herself as a wanderer at heart, powered by a keen interest in psychometric assessments and an enduring relationship with chocolate - in that order. "I had the privilege of wearing many hats over the past three decades and my work has enabled me to deliver projects across 85 countries and engage with more than 100 nationalities - helping leaders and organisations identify talent and navigate the complexities of human behaviour." Recently, she founded AeroAssess Consultancy in the UAE, where she helps shape the aviation industry's future of talent identification. As an Aviation Psychologist, she aspires to make aviation psychological services accessible to all in the aviation industry. "My expectation



Karien Stadler

from the PhD program is to advance the field of pilot selection through rigorous research and the development of innovative assessment methodologies, supported by world-class mentorship and academic guidance."

Prof. Ian Rothmann and Prof. Marius Stander are the promoters of her study.

"My expectation from the PhD program is to advance the field of pilot selection through rigorous research."

PhD in Social Sciences (Social Inclusion): Moya Mabala

Moyahabo (Moya) Mabala's passion for understanding people through numbers has shaped his appreciation for the role of data in addressing societal challenges. With a BSc in Statistics and Mathematics, he pursued a Master's in Demography and Population Studies, where he focused on the interplay between population dynamics and development. His career has encompassed research and development roles in government, where he applied data-driven insights to inform policies and enhance decision-making.

As a social scientist, his purpose is to analyse population trends and transform them into actionable solutions that promote societal well-being. "I am dedicated to advancing research that



Moya Mabala

fosters equity and sustainable development. Through this PhD, I aim to deepen my expertise in applying mathematical techniques to demographic research, develop innovative solutions to pressing challenges, and grow as

a leader in my field." Prof. Blessed Ngwenya is the promoter of the study.

"Through his interactions with retired clients, he observed the rigidity of traditional retirement models."

PhD in Social Sciences (Ageing and Development): Francois Riekert

Francois Riekert grew up in Rustenburg and began his academic journey in 1988 at the PU for CHE. After completing his degree, he did National Service in 1992 and continued serving in the military. In 1999, he joined Liberty as a financial adviser, where he discovered a passion for wealth management and international tax planning. To enhance his expertise, he pursued advanced qualifications in these specialised areas.

Now an Independent Financial Adviser, he works closely with clients to help them navigate complex financial landscapes. Through his interactions with retired clients, he observed the rigidity of traditional retirement models, which fail to accommodate the complexities of changing



Francois Riekert

life trajectories and age-related vulnerabilities. This inspired him for the PhD journey, which focused on reimagining retirement frameworks to support financial adaptability in a rapidly evolving world.

Francois is married to Marlé, and together, they compete in extreme endurance sports locally and internationally, embracing life's challenges as a team. Prof. Jaco Hoffman is the promoter of the study.

PhD in Social Sciences (Ageing and Development): Marietjie Ackermann

Marietjie Ackermann's interest in this PhD study started during the COVID-19 pandemic when her elderly parents began to need daily assistance for their day-to-day living. The plight, challenges, perceptions and fears about ageing, and needing assistance became more apparent, as the need to transition to full-time care, became a strong reality. The events that transpired that led to the traumatic experiences as they transitioned into a care facility, affected a whole ecology: she as the significant primary carer at the time, her parents, family members, professional care staff and the management of the particular institution.

When she heard about the United Nations Decade of Healthy Ageing 2021–2030, she realised that her experiences are not



Marietjie Ackerman

isolated incidents. "I believe therefore that the intention of the Decade is relevant to my study on the care of older persons and the transitions they need to make as they grow older. My expectation for the study is to create practical guidelines rele-

vant to role-players of the care-ecology surrounding ageing persons, that could guide them where family members are going through the same experience." Prof. Jaco Hoffman and Prof. Vera Roos are the promoters of the study.

PhD in Social Sciences (Social Inclusion): Monako Dibetle

Monako Dibetle is responsible for managing the communications and external affairs portfolios, leading McCain's community development programmes and ensuring that the company's sustainability reporting is in line with global company standards and targets. He has previously served an eight-year tenure at a leading food and beverage company, in various roles, focusing on private-public partnerships, government relations, stakeholder management, shared-value programmes, issues management and water stewardship.

He worked in print journalism, parastatals and the fast-moving consumer goods, pharmaceutical and mining sectors, spanning two decades. Monako holds a Master of Philosophy in



Monako Dibetle

Integrated Water Management from IIE MSA, an MDP in Management and Transformation from the University of Witwatersrand, a Post-Graduate Diploma in Marketing from the Institute of Marketing Management, and a Bachelor of Technology. He is passion-

ate about research on the water-poverty nexus or the intersection between natural resources and how they enable socio-economic prosperity, or the lack of, which can result in abject poverty in the developing world. Prof. Blessed Ngwenya is the study promoter.

"... women can change the livelihoods of their society when they are empowered financially."

PhD in Social Sciences (Ageing and Development): Leona Dukada

Leona Dukada works for the South African Reserve Bank in the Policy, Statistics, and Industry Support Department. She has identified minimal policy coverage to enhance and improve women's financial inclusion in South Africa. The country continues to lag in prioritizing financial inclusion for women compared to other emerging economies. The available literature provides evidence that very few studies focus on women's financial inclusion in South Africa, mainly covering women's access to and usage of financial products and services within the country. This exacerbates poverty for women, who are generally viewed as the leading players in improving the living conditions of the societies they live in. According to a report



Leona Dukada

by FinScope, 52% of the South African population is female, but the challenges women continue to face due to being financially excluded are enormous. Women who operate small businesses struggle with access to funding, which hinders their businesses' growth. Literature shows that

women can change the livelihoods of their society when they are empowered financially; thus, empowering women-led small businesses could benefit not only themselves but their communities. Prof. Jaco Hoffman and Prof. Vera Roos are the promoters of the study.

PhD in Social Sciences (Ageing and Development): Tas Matinhira

Tasunungurwa Matinhira hold a BSc Honours in Psychology and a Master's in Counselling Psychology. "With experience working in both the public and private sectors, particularly in a provincial hospital, I have provided psychological services to individuals of all ages."

My primary interest, however, lies in older adults, which led to my current PhD research on evaluating the effectiveness of psychoeducational interventions in improving sleep quality and mental health. My study investigates the combined use of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Insomnia (CBT-I) and Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) for this group. This research contributes new insights by exploring the synergistic effects of



Tasunungurwa Matinhira

these interventions, offering a fresh approach to improving mental health and sleep among older adults."

Prof. Jaco Hoffman and Prof. Vera Roos are the promoters of the study.

"... the two most important roles to me are those of mother and student."

PhD in Social Sciences (Social Inclusion): Elizabeth Kriel

Elizabeth Kriel is currently a junior lecturer in Optentia. Elizabeth completed a master's degree in Positive Psychology. As a statistical consultant, she assists various postgraduate students with complex statistical analyses.

"I have had many roles in life, from daughter to wife to employee; however, the two most important roles to me are those of mother and student. I found establishing a career while raising children very challenging, and started wondering how different women navigate these struggles."

"My research will focus on understanding the support structures, well-being, and capabilities of these women. Through this PhD, I hope to deepen my knowledge, refine my research



Elizabeth Kriel

skills, and connect with a community of scholars dedicated to making a difference. Dr Christiaan Bekker is the promoter of the study.

Master's Study on Inclusive Employment

The research study Kelebogile is conducting focuses on bridging the gap between the unemployed and the labour market by examining employers' attitudes, perceptions and intentions towards promoting inclusive employment with a focus on South Africa labour laws like the Basic Conditions of Employment (BCEA) and Employment Equity Act (EEA). South Africa's persistently high unemployment rate underscores the need for sustainable employment solutions, economic stability, and social cohesion.

Inclusive employment practices are essential for addressing unemployment, yet research often prioritises individual-focused interventions, overlooking the crucial role of employers. This gap highlights the need to

actively engage employers in solutions. Inclusive practices not only effectively reduce unemployment but also represent an ethical imperative, promoting social justice and human rights. By fostering equitable opportunities, these practices enable everyone to succeed and contribute to society, making employers vital partners in creating a more inclusive and fair labour market.

"The research focus is deeply personal to me, inspired by my experience growing up in a community where unemployment affects families and the wider community. I will be working closely with businesses and organisations to collect data, gain meaningful insights and identify actionable strategies. Their input will be vital in shaping policies



Kelebogile Ramagaga

and interventions that promote inclusive hiring practices and reduce the gaps in the South Africa's labour market." Prof. Ian Rothmann, Dr Neil Barnard and Dr Werner Gresse are the supervisors of the study.

"The research focus is deeply personal to me..."

Research and Innovation Award for Prof. Marita Heyns

The North-West University celebrated the outstanding contributions to teaching and learning, community engagement, and research and innovation of its members during its annual Excellence Awards ceremony on Thursday, 21 November 2024, at Feather Hill in Potchefstroom. Among the honourees was Professor Marita Heyns, who received a Research and Innovation award in recognition of her National Research Foundation rating as an established researcher.

The end of the year is a time for reflection. It encourages us to look back on the past year's events, consider the challenges faced, and think about how we could have approached them differently. However, it is also a moment to celebrate the high-



Prof. Marita Heyns and Prof. Jeffrey Mmphahlele

lights and express gratitude for so many different reasons. Such recognition events provide perspective and inspire us for the

future. It is truly a privilege to be part of the North-West University

A Mind For Business and Heart For People *by Neil Barnard*

As the Programme Leader for Human Flourishing in Institutions at the Optentia Research Unit and a Senior Lecturer at the School of Industrial Psychology and Human Resource Management, I am pleased to reflect on our school in this edition of the Optentia newsletter.

Our school is more than just a place of learning; it's a community passionate about making a real difference in the workplace. From undergraduates to PhD candidates, our programs are crafted not just to teach but to empower. We meld theory with real-world application, ensuring that once out there, our students are ready to hit the ground running and make an impact.

We pride ourselves on not just following the trends in industrial psychology and human resource management but setting them. We delve deep into organizational dynamics while keeping a keen eye on individual well-being. This balance prepares our students and researchers to be agents of change, equipped with both a mind for business and a heart for people.

This year has been filled with activities aimed at extending our reach and deepening our impact. We've brought industry experts into the classroom, ventured out into the field with collaborative research, and shared our research on an international platform.

Our school aims to create opportunities to develop and share knowledge and a platform for innovation. We're all about creating environments where businesses can thrive while ensuring people are happy, healthy, and engaged in a sustainable manner. We teach our students



and researchers to tackle complex challenges with smart, compassionate solutions.

The connection between our research and teaching is vital to what we do. We make sure that our programs don't just pass on knowledge but also spark curiosity and drive innovation. This approach helps us stay at the cutting edge of workplace challenges, always ready to contribute meaningfully to academic discussions and practical solutions.

Our curriculum is designed to build more than just knowledge—it builds leaders. Leaders who understand the importance of fostering a healthy, dynamic workplace culture that's as concerned with results as it is with people.

We invite our students, alumni, and academic colleagues to join us in pushing boundaries, undertaking collaborative projects, and embracing lifelong learning. We're not just educating the next generation of professionals; we're shaping a future where workplaces are not only more effective but also more supportive and humane.

Thank you for your ongoing support. Together, we're paving the way for a future driven by the principles of human flourishing, where industrial psychology and human resource management not only understand the human element in business but champion it.

Here's to continuing to explore, innovate, and inspire!

"We pride ourselves on not just following the trends in industrial psychology and human resource management but setting them."

If your actions
inspire others
to dream more, learn more,
do more and become more,
you are a
LEADER.

Award for Prof. Darelle van Greunen

Nelson Mandela University's Darelle van Greunen, a Distinguished Professor of Information Technology, was awarded the prestigious Inspiring Fifty award on 10 November. The award honours 50 remarkable women mak-

ing impactful contributions across Africa's tech ecosystem, inspiring the next generation of talent, and driving forward diversity and inclusion. Click [here](#) to read more.



Prof. Darelle van Greunen

Empowering Excellence: Support Staff—Optentia's Backbone

At the heart of every successful endeavour is a team of dedicated individuals working tirelessly behind the scenes. We express our deepest gratitude to our exceptional support staff members — Lynn Booysen, Marinda Malan, Anjonet Jordaan, Kele Ramagaga, and Soraya Harding — for their unwavering commitment and outstanding contributions. Each of these remarkable individuals plays a vital role in ensuring the smooth functioning of our operations:

- Lynn Booysen for her meticulous attention to logistics,
- Marinda Malan for her financial expertise and tireless efforts to keep our resources managed effectively.
- Anjonet Jordaan for her academic and marketing support, which keeps our projects on track and aligned with excellence.
- Kele Ramagaga for her administrative and creative strategies in our academic mentor and mentee courses that elevate our visibility.
- Soraya Harding for her com-

ensuring every event and project runs seamlessly.

passionate and efficient research administration and student support, making every learner feel valued and empowered.

Their collective efforts have created a strong foundation for our success, and their dedication has not gone unnoticed. Whether it's coordinating complex schedules, streamlining financial processes, or providing a helping hand to students, each of you has contributed significantly to fostering a vibrant and supportive environment.

"Their collective efforts have created a strong foundation for our success, and their dedication has not gone unnoticed."



Soraya Harding, Anjonet Jordaan, Lynn Booysen, Elizabeth Kriel, Kelebogile Ramagaga and Marinda Malan got the opportunity to visit Mongena Lodge and experience a game drive

Coming Soon: A New Book on Job Insecurity in Higher Education

A new Springer book is coming soon. The title of the book is: *Global Perspectives on Job Insecurity in Higher Education: Precarity in the Ivory Tower*. This groundbreaking peer-reviewed volume is edited by Prof. Hans De Witte, Prof. Lara Roll, and Prof. Ian Rothmann. This unique book comprehensively explores one of the most pressing issues in academia today - job insecurity. The project was conceived in 2017 at the Optentia Research Unit of North-West University, South Africa, when Prof. Lara Roll, then a postdoctoral researcher under the guidance of Prof. Ian Rothmann, and Prof. Hans De Witte, a visiting scholar, began discussing a growing concern: the precarious nature of employment in higher education. What began as a small-scale study in their respective countries soon expanded into a global research consortium, bringing together experts from 10 countries. Over several international conferences, this collaboration flourished, resulting in a large-scale, multi-country dataset collected in 2018.

The book showcases the insights and findings of 26 scholars, offering 11 in-depth chapters based on this global dataset. With contributions from across four continents, the volume provides a rich, international perspective on the increasingly precarious work conditions in academia. Stay tuned for the release of this essential volume - *Precarity in the Ivory Tower* promises to be a vital resource for anyone interested in the evolving landscape of higher education and the challenges academic professionals face worldwide. The chapters and authors are as follows:



Prof. Lara Roll, Prof. Hans De Witte and contributors to the book on job insecurity in higher education

- Chapter 1. Introduction: The Growing Crisis of Job Insecurity in Academia
- Chapter 2. Job Insecurity within Higher Education: An Assessment of Measurement Invariance and Global Trends
- Chapter 3. The Cross-Cultural Equivalence of Predictor, Moderator and Outcome Variables Related to Job Insecurity in Academic Settings: A Maximum Likelihood Alignment Approach
- Chapter 4. Thriving or depleted? Profiles of burnout and work engagement in academia.
- Chapter 5. Job Insecurity and Self-Undermining: Exploring the Mediating Effects on Counterproductive Work Behavior and In-Role Performance in Higher Education
- Chapter 6. Afraid of losing who you are? Job insecurity among academics can become an identity threat
- Chapter 7. How can job insecurity lead to poor in-role performance and innovative work behaviour in academia? The mediating role of burnout
- Chapter 8. Insecurity and Justice in Academia: Exploring the Interplay
- Chapter 9. Job insecurity, temporary contracts and their interaction: associations with a variety of performance indicators in academia.
- Chapter 10. Qualitative Job Insecurity is Associated with Lower Work Motivation, Work Adjustment, and Life Wellbeing among Faculty Teaching Staff in China's Higher Education Institutions
- Chapter 11. How workplace social capital moderates the effects of job insecurity: Greece as a case study
- Chapter 12. Epilogue..

"What began as a small-scale study in their respective countries soon expanded into a global research consortium, bringing together experts from 10 countries."



Towards a Career Development Strategy for South Africa

Prof. Ian Rothmann recently took part in a panel discussion on developing a career development strategy for South Africa hosted by the Director of Career Development of the Department of Higher Education and Training. Prof. Rothmann suggested three critical considerations, namely a) that the capability approach (CA) be used to position individuals for the changing nature of work; b) that the focus should be on developing and maintaining their well-being and resilience; and c) that they develop social and environmental consciousness.

The CA emphasises the outcomes of development and the opportunities and freedoms individuals have to achieve these outcomes. While the individual's skills and attributes are crucial, the CA addresses the external factors influencing career development. Therefore, it is essential to identify and develop peoples' core capabilities and expand their capability sets. Focusing on well-being entails considering peoples' development of pathways from languishing to flourishing in educational, work and community settings. Building resilience includes fostering a growth mindset, embracing failures as learning opportunities, and maintaining a support network of colleagues



Dr James Keevey and Prof. Ian Rothmann

and mentors. Furthermore, individuals should position themselves in roles that contribute to sustainability, social justice, and community well-being.

Prof. Rothmann pointed out that the terms "employability skills," "21st-century skills," and "future skills" are often used interchangeably, but they each have distinct connotations and emphases. A common term is essential to avoid confusion and ensure that educational institutions, employers, and individuals are aligned in their understanding of necessary skills. It helps set clear goals for skill development and creates a shared language for discussing workforce readiness. An integrated approach that

combines employability skills, 21st century skills, and future skills is essential to prepare individuals for present and future challenges. Opportunity recognition is a significant challenge for many young people in South Africa due to educational shortcomings, economic and social barriers, and systemic issues.

Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that includes improving education and skills development, increasing access to information and resources, providing mentorship, and creating an enabling environment that supports youth in recognising and pursuing opportunities.

"While the individual's skills and attributes are crucial, the CA addresses the external factors influencing career development."

Progress: Capability Book by Prof. Ian Rothmann

A large-scale project on work capabilities is currently underway. The title of the book is: "The Added Value of the Capability Model for Well-being at Work." The editors are Prof. Jac van der Klink and Prof. Ian Rothmann. We hope to have the book ready in 2025.



Prof. Jac van der Klink



Prof. Ian Rothmann

Recognition for Prof. Andries Baart

On 19 November 2024, Optentia's extraordinary Prof. Andries Baart received the Elisabeth Kübler-Ross Prize 2024. This prize is awarded once every two years by the National Support Center for Voluntary Palliative Terminal Care (VPTZ) to people who have made a significant contribution to palliative and terminal care. Prof. Andries Baart is the father of presence theory and in that capacity has contributed greatly to palliative care as it is currently given in the Netherlands - in hospice and in at home settings. The award was presented, in the presence of His Majesty King Willem Alexander, at the symposium 'Being There' on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the VPTZ. Prof. Baart was praised for making care a matter of people again. In his lecture, which Prof. Baart gave afterwards to the 700 attendees and the King, he argued that palliative care should talk back to curative care. The relational work practiced by volunteers and professionals in palliative care is crucial for all of



Prof. Andries Baart

"Prof. Baart was praised for making care a matter of people again..."

care and not just in the last phase of someone's life. Although that is precisely when it matters. In his closing words, 'Palliative care is not the capstone of care but its laboratory'. Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (1926-2004), a psychiatrist of Swiss descent who lived and worked in the USA, is considered the founder of theories as well as end-of-life care;

her books, including *On Death and Dying* (1969), *Stages of Dying* (1972) and *The Wheel of Life* (1997), have sold in tens of millions and in many languages. She also received no less than 20 honorary doctorates for her groundbreaking work. With his award, Prof. Andries Baart is set in that line.

The Virtual Gratitude Visit *by* Prof. Llewellyn van Zyl

Gratitude is a simple yet powerful emotional experience. In the academic literature, it refers to the practice of recognizing the good things in life and appreciating how these things positively impacts our lives. In Positive Psychology, a popular gratitude exercise is the Gratitude Visit. But what happens when the person you want to thank is no longer in your life? Maybe they've passed away, or you've lost touch. How can you still experience the powerful effects of a

gratitude visit when an in-person meeting isn't possible? Well, Dan Tomasulo (2019) says we can... Through a Virtual Gratitude Visit.

According to Tomasulo (2019), a Virtual Gratitude Visit is a creative way to reap the benefits of a gratitude visit when you can't do it face-to-face. Inspired by the traditional gratitude visit, this exercise allows you to express appreciation for someone, even if they are no longer present in your life.

Click [here](#) to read the article about virtual gratitude visits written by Prof. Llewellyn van Zyl.



Prof. Llewellyn van Zyl

Prof. JT Janse van Rensburg at EdMedia 2024

Attending the EdMedia 2024 conference in Brussels was a rewarding experience, filled with insightful presentations and engaging discussions. The city's rich history and stunning landmarks, from the Grand Place to the Atomium, provided a perfect backdrop for the conference. The conference brought together educators, researchers, and technologists from around the globe, all eager to explore the latest advancements in educational media and technology.

One of the highlights was the keynote sessions, which delved into the transformative potential of AI in education. The workshops and panel discussions provided a platform for sharing innovative practices and exploring new pedagogical approaches. The diversity of topics, from scholarly writing patterns to the integration of large language models in education, showcased the breadth of research and innovation in the field.

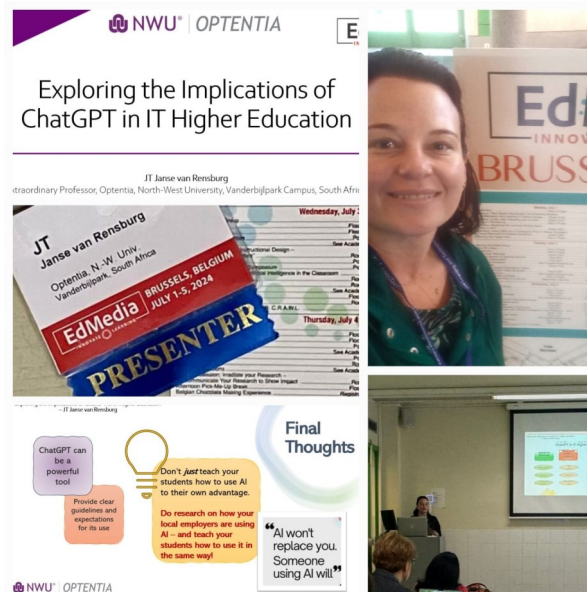
JT had the privilege of presenting her paper, "Exploring the Implications of ChatGPT in IT Higher Education: Opportunities

and Challenges." The session was well-received, sparking a lively discussion on the potential of ChatGPT to enhance learning experiences and the challenges it poses in terms of academic integrity and ethical considerations.

Overall, EdMedia 2024 was a testament to the dynamic and evolving nature of educational technology. The conference underscored the critical importance of AI studies in education, high-

lighting how these advancements can revolutionise teaching and learning processes.

The opportunity to explore Belgium with a loved one added to the enriching experience. We had the privilege of meeting new friends, enjoying the local cuisine, and exploring a number of cities across this beautiful country. A special thanks to Optentia's stars, Marinda and Lynn, for making this incredible experience possible on very short notice!



"One of the highlights was the keynote sessions, which delved into the transformative potential of AI in education."

Nicho Ntema: Making a Difference in Sharpville

Optentia staff recently met Mr. Nicho Ntema of Sharpville to discuss community engagement projects. Sharpville is significant in South Africa's history as the site of the 1960 Sharpeville Massacre, where police killed peaceful protesters opposing apartheid pass laws. This event resulted in global condemnation and intensifying resistance against racial segregation and oppression in South Africa.



Prof. Jaco Hoffman, Anjonet Jordaan, Nicho Ntema and Prof. Ian Rothmann

New Book a Must-Read for Care Professionals and Ethicists!

Just Released: December 2024
Relational Caring and Presence Theory in Health Care and Social Work: A Care-Ethical Perspective.

In a world shaped by three decades of neoliberal efficiency-driven policies, healthcare and social work are now facing an urgent demand for deeper relationality. This groundbreaking book by renowned scholars Andries Baart and Guus Timmerman sheds light on the vital role of relationships in caregiving, moving beyond mere service provision to explore the profound connections between caregivers and care recipients within their socio-institutional environments.

The book explores how relational caring and presence theory, grounded in care-ethical insights, can transform health and social support systems. It emphasises the importance of meaningful relationships for improved care outcomes and mutual understanding.

The culmination of over 30 years of research, this book provides a comprehensive and critical introduction to relational working in care, education and welfare. It explains what relational work is and proposes a new, human-orientated theory beyond the simple model of meeting needs.

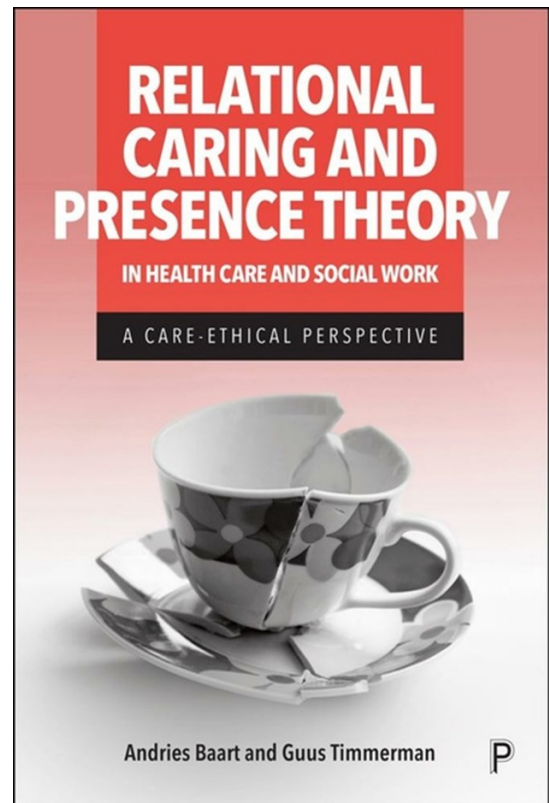
Part 1 (seven chapters) presents the history, concept(s), practice and theory of presence, including how the actual theory of presence and its core of caring is constructed, grounded and applied in relational care (across dozens of domains, practices and institutions). Part 2 (again seven chapters with an intermezzo) explains and illustrates specific, practice-related tenets of presence theory and the presence

approach are explained and illustrated, from its quality criteria and the formation of professionals to the ability to perceive the other and to the political-ethical importance of relating to others. All chapters demonstrate their message in a wide variety of cases and are rooted in modern, international scholarly developments. And all aspects of this radical and relational caring are covered: practice, theory, research, ethics, policy, profes-

sionalism, education, quality assessment, organisation etc. A rich, up-to-date and essential reading for researchers, educators, quality managers, policy makers, students and practitioners interested in understanding the growing scholarship related to both care theory and presence theory.

Optentia intends to organise a book launch in April 2025. Further news on this will follow in early 2025.

"This book provides a comprehensive and critical introduction to relational working in care, education and welfare."



Prof. Andries Baart

A Year of Transformative Research by Dr Christiaan Bekker

In the past year, I (co-) supervised three exceptional master's students whose research has significantly contributed to our understanding of social and psychological factors affecting vulnerable populations. Their studies, which focused on bullying in primary schools, intimate partner violence, and postpartum depression, have highlighted the critical role of community, support systems, and tailored interventions in addressing these issues.

The first study by Ms. Mogomotsi Mfelang explored the experiences of educators involved in anti-bullying programs in Gauteng West district primary schools. It underscored the importance of parental and community involvement in creating effective strategies to combat bullying. The second study by Ms. Mokgantso Koto provided a comprehensive overview of the factors contributing to intimate partner violence in South Africa, emphasising the need for culturally and contextually relevant interventions. The third study by Ms. Nita Mahlangu, under the co-supervision of Prof. Caroll Hermann, examined the psychosocial factors influencing postpartum depression in rural KwaZulu-Natal.

Reflecting on these studies, I am excited to take on new master's students in 2025 and work with three PhD candidates. The students will focus on identifying strengths and developing an intervention programme, exploring the uptake and use of AI based on personality type, and examining the capabilities and flourishing of working mothers with school-going children.

My future research will focus on the intersection of social and psychological factors in education and health, with positive psychology as the foundation. I look forward to continued collaboration within the SMILE with Diabetes project of Prof. Elmarie Deacon. I was also lucky enough to have been included in a multinational project that addresses the unique challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ students. This project, titled "Understanding and Tackling Health Disparities in LGBTQIA+ Communities Across the Globe," will unite scholars from over 40 countries to explore the complex interactions among individual, group, and structural factors contributing to health disparities. We aim to enhance understanding and inform evidence-based solutions to promote equity for LGBTQIA+ communities worldwide by fostering collaboration among diverse scholars and stakeholders. As I embark on new research endeavours, I am optimistic and determined to contribute to meaningful change, fostering inclusive and supportive environments that promote the well-being of all individuals, especially those in vulnerable and marginalised communities.

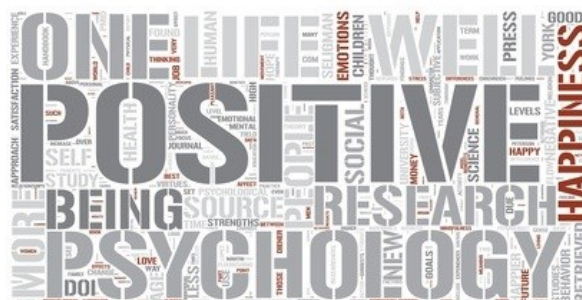


Mogomotsi Mfelang, Mianda Erasmus (supervisor) and Dr. Christiaan Bekker (co-supervisor)



**Ms. Mokgantso Koto, Dr
Christiaan Bekker (co-
supervisor), Gerhard Rodg-
ers (co-supervisor) Dr
Shanae Theunissen
(supervisor)**

"I am optimistic and determined to contribute to meaningful change, fostering inclusive and supportive environments that promote the well-being of all individuals."



Centre for Applied Risk Management is Growing

The Centre for Applied Risk Management (UARM) is growing rapidly. UARM celebrated its 10th anniversary in October since the first intake of Masters students was in 2014. We selected a dozen new students every year, resulting in up to 24 students in the programme at any point in time as they typically complete the course in two years.

However, demand for the course has increased significantly in both the public and private sectors. With the support of university management to provide additional resources, this year saw the new student intake swell to 22 first-year students. To our surprise, we received 79 Masters applications with the required NQF8 qualifications for the next intake in 2025. We carefully selected another 24 students, following a rigorous selection process including the TALPS test and assignments, which we found previously to be excellent predictors of student success. To

“... demand for the course has increased significantly in both the public and private sectors.”



Thapelo Modisagae (PhD Student); Prof. Hermien Zaaime (research leader), Fred Goede (programme leader); Prof. Marise Born (extraordinary professor), and Prof. Ian Rothmann

manage such a large programme, we managed to contract additional supervisors and assistant supervisors, that will require additional training in January 2025. The overwhelming interest from experienced alumni and other academics resulted in 30 new contracts for 2025. Prof Neels Erasmus has been instrumental in automating the contact process to reduce the administrative burden on lecturers. Dr Emmanuel Mulambya, Eddie

Lindeque and Fred Goede will be instrumental in delivering the modules in 2025.

The research programme on organisational risk culture and risk work is also growing under the watchful eye of prof Hermien Zaaime, who is looking forward to a well-deserved retirement later in 2025. Five PhD students are working on proposals for their studies, bringing the total number of UARM students in 2025 to an impressive 51!

Inaugural Lecture as Professor: Prof. Elmarie Deacon

On 5 November 2024, Prof. Elmarie Deacon presented her inaugural lecture as a professor. Her lecture was about the Smile with Diabetes project. The SMILE with Diabetes project explores psychosocial factors in adapting to diabetes management within a Positive Psychology framework, focusing on illness perception and meaning-making. Research shows that individuals with well-controlled diabetes redefine the condition as manageable, enabling positive outcomes despite emotional distress. The meaning-making model explains how diabetes challenges global beliefs,



The inaugural lecture of Prof. Elmarie Deacon

creating opportunities to reinterpret the condition and integrate it into daily life. Interventions include a web-based program for adolescents using diabetes technologies and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) guidelines for practitioners. Future plans in-

volve developing a web-based tool for adults with type 2 diabetes, studying self-compassion in diabetes management, and conducting a case study on successful type 2 diabetes care in private practice. Click [here](#) to watch a video of the inaugural lecture.

Prof. Japie Greeff and BRICS

During October and November 2024, Prof. Japie Greeff engaged heavily in the BRICS context with colleagues in China and South Africa in a number of events. During the BRICS International Finals of the Data Analysis and Visualisation challenge in China one of his students, Ms Dean Dube, competed and won the Bronze medal for her performance. Prof. Greeff won an excellent instructors award at the same event. After this he presented a keynote address at the Annual Meeting of the Big Data and Artificial Intelligence Working Committee of the International Alliance of Skills Development, also in China.

Once back in South Africa he engaged with the Belt and Road initiative and was lead judge in the BRICS Innovation Competition which was hosted at the NWU, which brought together 133 competitors from China and South Africa to show off their innovative research and industrial projects. At the same time as the innovation competition, NWU also hosted the BRICS Robotic Process Automation Challenge, where Ms Jacqui Muller was the lead judge, and undergraduate competitors from South Africa and China faced off against one another. As these events were so successful, the BRICS Business Council awarded the NWU the status of Training Base, making it the first institution in South Africa to achieve this designation in the international context.

In November 2024, Prof. Greeff visited China in the cities of Tai'an and Chongqing. In Tai'an his student, Ms Dean Dube, represented the NWU in the finals of the BRICS International Data



Prof. Sibusiso Chalufu, Prof. Japie Greeff, Ms Palesa Makoti (BRICS Business Council), and Dr Liu Zhenying (Chairman, China BRICS Business Council Skills Development, Applied Technology and Innovation Working Group)

Analysis and Visualisation Skills Challenge where out of 174 competitors from 14 countries she took home the bronze medal and Japie won an excellent instructors award. Next in Chongqing he gave the keynote presentation at the International Skills Alliance AI

and Big Data Professional Working Committee Annual Meeting. It was an incredible opportunity to again visit China and meet many people to collaborate with in future!

"... the BRICS Business Council awarded the NWU the status of Training Base."

Happiness in South Africa: Ruut Veenhoven and Ian Rothmann

Prof. Ruut Veenhoven died on 9 December 2024. Therefore, we publish the article that he co-authored with Prof. Ian Rothmann (Optentia News, 15 August 2015).

How happy are South Africans currently? How does their happiness compare to other countries? Is the level of happiness in South Africa going up or down? For that purpose, Prof. Ian Rothmann and Prof. Ruut Veenhoven analysed the available research findings gathered in the World Database of Happiness, and in particular, those in the section on South Africa in the mentioned findings archive.

Happiness is the subjective enjoyment of one's life as a whole; in other words, how much you like the life you lead. This is also known as 'life satisfaction'. Since this is what we have in mind, it can be measured using questions.

Satisfaction with your own life is not the same as satisfaction with living conditions in your country. You can enjoy your own life and still think that living conditions in the country are poor. It is also possible for you to think that you live in the best possible country, but still be depressed. Studies in developed nations have shown that citizens are typically positive about their personal lives, but negative about the society they live in. This difference has several reasons. One is that we are better informed about our own lives than about the life of the average citizen. Another reason lies in the natural inclination to pay more attention to what is wrong than what is right and the amplification of that perceptual bias by the media, for which good news is no news. This dominance of discontent with



Prof. Ian Rothmann and Prof. Ruut Veenhoven in 2015. Prof. Veenhoven died on 9 December 2024

"Happiness is the subjective enjoyment of one's life as a whole."

society in the media is another reason for focusing this paper on satisfaction with personal life.

The researchers found that South Africans tend to score relatively high on the affective component of happiness and average on the cognitive compo-

nent. This reflects a more general pattern of cheerful discontent in broader Africa. This begs the question of what is most indicative of a good life, cheerful discontent or depressed contentment. Click [here](#) to read the full paper.



Charting Your Path to Impact *by* Prof. Leoni van der Vaart

When drafting a research paper, it's essential to think of your contribution as charting new territory in the landscape of (social) sciences. Drawing from insights by [McNamara and Schleicher](#) (2024), consider these well-worn paths to impact, each offering a different way to add value to the field.

The theoretical insights path is akin to building bridges over unexplored terrain. Here, you either construct new theoretical frameworks or expand on existing ones to help others cross uncharted conceptual spaces. Whether you're creating fresh theories, expanding established ones, or setting boundaries for their application, this path allows others to travel further with your insights. [Also see [Bansal et al., 2024](#) and [Thatcher et al., 2024](#)] For those drawn to the phenomenon-driven path, picture yourself as a cartographer, mapping critical issues – grand challenges, timely topics, or real-world puzzles – impacting organisations and communities. Grounding these explorations in theory provides the coordinates needed to guide future inquiries, making this map invaluable to scholars and practitioners alike. [Also see: [Lumineau et al., 2024](#)]

Next, the research methodology path resembles innovating new tools or upgrading old ones. By introducing refined or novel methods, you're sharpening the instruments that researchers use to excavate truths, ensuring each dig is more precise and revealing than the last. Methodological contributions refine our toolkit, enhancing rigour and relevance. [Also see: [Bergh et al., 2022](#)]

Think — methods — Again



Source: DALL-E

Finally, review papers are like surveyors, observing from above to offer a sweeping view of existing knowledge. A well-crafted review not only summarises but provides signposts for future research, helping others navigate complex literature. Integrative, rather than purely narrative, reviews often achieve this best by offering clear directions for

where the next discoveries might lie. [Also see: [Cronin & George, 2023](#)]

Each path is unique, but all contribute to advancing the social sciences in meaningful ways. By aligning your work with these pathways, you help ensure it's not just a paper but a lasting contribution to knowledge.

“... there comes a time when you've got to roll up your sleeves and pay it forward by conducting your own review...”



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Books

- Boyatzis, R.E. (2024). The science of change: Discovering sustained, desired change from individuals to organizations and communities. Oxford University Press.
- Damon, W. (2012). The path to purpose.: How young people find their calling in life. Free Press.
- Ungar, M. (2024). The limits of resilience: Knowing when to persevere, when to change, and when to quit. Sutherland House.
- Keyes, C. (2024). Languishing: How to feel alive again in a world that wears us down. Penquib Books.

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

Useful Websites

- <https://goodorganisations.com>
- <https://youtube.com/c/GoodOrganisations> is an informative YouTube channel
- www.refseek.com is a search engine for academic resources.
- www.worldcat.org - search the content of 20,000 global libraries.
- <https://link.springer.com> - access to more than 10 million scientific documents: books, articles,
- <http://repec.org> - Volunteers from 102 countries collected nearly 4 million publications
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