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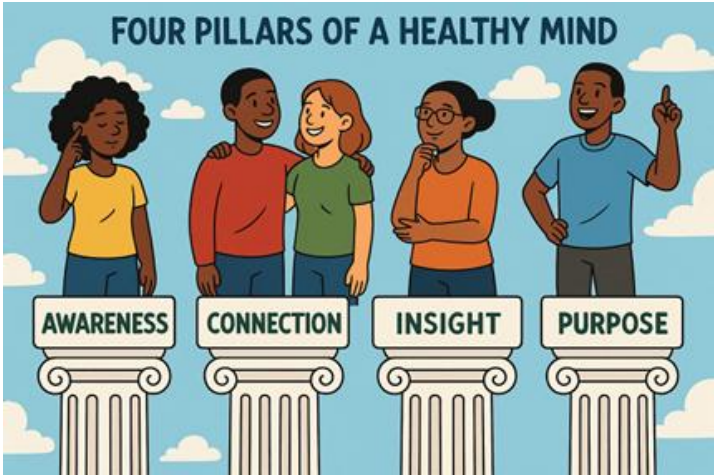
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Mindfulness in Practice: How Four Pillars Support Us

As the year wound down at North-West University, the campus grew quieter. Researchers and support staff had spent months studying how people move from precariousness toward capability, and many recognised the need to apply the same care to their own lives.

One afternoon, a few colleagues gathered for tea. Richard Davidson’s four pillars of a healthy mind came up. Awareness surfaced first. Someone admitted she had been moving on autopilot, spotting issues in her research before noticing her own fatigue. Another said that a short pause each morning helped him start the day with a clearer mind. They turned to connection. A support staff member noted how simple check-ins with colleagues often shifted the tone of a busy day. They encouraged connection in their work but sometimes forgot to practise it themselves. Insight followed. A young academic shared how noticing his reactions under pressure helped him approach deadlines with more calm. Purpose tied the conversation together. Remembering why they chose this work steadied them.

Before leaving, they agreed that mindfulness sat at the centre of it all. With the Christmas holidays approaching, they hoped to carry these pillars into the quieter weeks ahead.



Optentia Achievements: 2025

Optentia has 35 permanent staff members (7 professors and 4 associate professors), and 47 temporary staff (including 44 extraordinary professors). We published 85.35 peer-reviewed articles, book chapters, and conference papers so far in 2025. Optentia currently has 10 NRF-rated researchers. Remarkably, our statistics show that 1063 individuals have benefited from Optentia events.



The Optentia Scorecard

	2022	2023	2024	2025
Peer-reviewed article equivalents	70.63	46.80	60.70	85.35
Papers: Conferences	9	27	10	7
Participating master's students	34	63	77	54
Completed master's students	23	5	18	16
Participating PhD students	52	50	39	42 (16)
Completed PhD students	6	10	10	5 (4)
Number of workshops presented	10	19	11	8
Number of workshop participants	250	619	550	1063
Number of mentors trained	-	-	59	50
Number of mentees trained	-	-	49	45

Optentia Pulse: Spotlights and Breaking News

- Optentia has released a video with the title: "Research on Ageing at Optentia". Click [here](#) to watch the video.
- Visit our [Glide page](#) for more information about our mentor and mentee short courses.
- Optentia aims to set up a memorandum of understanding with the National Taiwan University of Science and Technology (NTUST).
- A writing retreat is planned for PhD students and researchers for April 2026.
- Optentia recommended that the following extraordinary professors be appointed from January 2026: Prof. M. Heyns, Prof. K. Lonka, Prof. M. Stander, Prof. C. Wekerle and Prof. L. Weiss.
- In 2025, Optentia made steady progress and reached several goals that strengthened the unit. Highlights included the Optentia Usiba writing retreat, Prof. Jaco Hoffman's participation in the International Federation of Ageing Conference, three book launches, and more than 85 article equivalents accepted for publication. We also completed a new book on work capabilities and continued to support researchers by providing access to essential software and training.

Message: Optentia's New Director: Prof. Blessed (Bee) Nhlanganiso Ngwenya

I am truly honoured to step into the role of Research Director at Optentia. It feels like a meaningful new chapter, and I am excited to walk this path with colleagues who care deeply about the work we do.

My academic journey has always been shaped by a simple curiosity about how people communicate, organise their lives, make sense of society and social justice. That curiosity carried me from Johannesburg to Oxford, where I completed my PhD and MSt in Socio-Legal Studies, exploring the fragile dance between the law, media, power, and democracy.

Since then, I have been fortunate to teach, supervise, and research at Wits University, UNISA, and the Vaal University of Technology before joining Optentia in 2022, where I co-ordinated the Inclusion and Decolonial Praxis program. Along the way, I've launched community projects like UNISA Radio and Voice of Wits, and I've supervised students who continue to inspire me with their courage and intellectual generosity. These experiences have taught me that research is never only about producing knowledge; it is also about growing people and strengthening communities.

As I take up this responsibility, I do so with deep gratitude for Prof. Ian Rothmann, who has built an exceptional foundation for the unit. His leadership has made Optentia a place where people feel seen, supported, and encouraged to do meaningful work. I count myself among those who have benefitted immensely from his incomparable leadership, including exceptional guidance from the program leaders at Optentia (Profs Jaco Hoffman, Marita Heyns, Vera Roos, Japie Greef, Leoni van der Vaart, Hermien Zaaime, Dr Fred Goede, Dr Neil Barnard, Elizabeth Kriel, the evergreen administrative team (Lynn Booysen, Marinda Malan, Soraya Harding, Kele Ramagaga and

Anjonet Jordaan and the support of Ayanda Kili).

I also approach this role with a keen awareness of the extraordinary pace at which AI and information technologies are reshaping our world. Innovations emerge almost daily, disrupting established practices and challenging the assumptions that guide research and societal engagement. What works today may be obsolete tomorrow, and the ability to anticipate, adapt, and respond quickly has never been more critical. That is why agility, humility, and openness must guide us. I am committed to bridging the gap between academic theory and the realities of everyday life, ensuring that our research speaks meaningfully to society and drives tangible impact.

At my core, I value honesty, collaboration, and shared purpose. I prefer conversations to hierarchies, shared problem-solving to top-down decisions, and collective wisdom to individual brilliance. I often draw strength from the proverb: "the strength of the crocodile is in the water." For me, it means that our power lies in the collective when we support one another, challenge one another, and create space for everyone to contribute.

Interdisciplinarity excites me, and I am deeply committed to supporting early-career researchers and postgraduate students. Optentia's mantra development + capacitation = competence and application capture perfectly the kind of academic ecosystem I believe in: one where people grow, learn, and apply their skills in ways that make a real difference.

I hope to work within the collective, engage with ideas, and understand how we can strengthen our research together. My focus will be on building bridges between sub-programmes, finding new spaces for collaboration, and expanding our international partnerships. I want Optentia to remain a community where people feel safe to innovate, ask difficult questions, and pursue work that has both intellectual depth and societal meaning. I look forward to connecting with the larger Optentia family in the months ahead and to building an agile, compassionate, and boldly collaborative Optentia together.

From Sharpeville to Tilburg University *by* Kele Ramagaga

Growing up in Sharpeville, I often wondered if studying abroad was something I could ever achieve, it felt like a distant dream, but today I am proud to say that dream has become a reality, as I am currently participating in an exchange programme at Tilburg University in the Netherlands.

Arriving in a new country brought excitement, challenges, and countless lessons that continue to shape me both personally and professionally. Navigating an unfamiliar academic system, adapting to a different culture, and stepping beyond my comfort zone taught me resilience, curiosity, and self-discovery. I have come to deeply appreciate the value of research, as being in lecture rooms allowed me to see firsthand how theories shape real-world phenomena, and I have learned that when applying knowledge in practice, it is always important to reflect on theory.

Along the way, I was reminded of the power of opportunities and capabilities, the essence of the Capability Approach, which shows that with support and freedom, what once seemed impossible can become reality. I am deeply grateful to everyone who made this journey possible, to Prof. Ian Rothmann, Dr Debbie Mtshwelwane, Prof. Mirna Nel, Ms Lynn Booysen, the Optentia family, my parents, extended family, and friends, whose encouragement and guidance expanded my freedoms and allowed me to embrace this life-changing experience. Today, I carry these lessons forward, inspired to seize every opportunity, learn from every challenge, and create a life full of growth, purpose, and meaningful impact.



Kele Ramagaga found that a bicycle is essential in the Netherlands



Kele Ramagaga at Tilburg University

AI and the Future of Well-being: A Call to Stewardship by Prof. Llewellyn van Zyl

We are living through a quiet revolution. AI systems are already deciding what counts as happiness on our social feeds, coaching millions through mental health apps, and shaping how organisations measure and optimise human flourishing. The algorithms are moving faster than the science, and the definitions of well-being are being written by engineers and venture capitalists rather than by the people who have spent decades studying what it actually means to live well. If positive psychology does not step into this conversation now, with both intellectual rigour and ethical clarity, we risk waking up in a world where the pursuit of human flourishing has been reduced to whatever can be quantified, monetised, and scaled by machines that were never trained to understand the complexity of a human life.

That is why Martin Seligman and Llewellyn van Zyl are inviting you to join us. From 23-27 March 2026, the International Positive Psychology Association will host a five-day virtual summit titled "AI and the Future of Well-being: Navigating the Promise and Perils for Positive Psychology." This is not a conference about whether AI belongs in our field. I mean, it's already here! This is about reclaiming our seat at the table, cutting through the hype and the fear, and building the frameworks we need to engage with AI as critically and compassionately as we engage with any human theory or intervention. The summit will bring together researchers, practitioners, educators, and technologists from around the world to explore real opportunities, surface genuine risks, and equip our community with the practical and ethical tools needed to shape AI's role in human well-being rather than simply react to it.

You will learn from people who are doing this work right now. Across dozens of sessions, you will hear from researchers mapping how AI encodes bias in mental health assessment, practitioners integrating conversational agents into trauma-informed care, technologists building systems that honour cultural pluralism, and ethicists asking the questions that keep them awake at night. You will leave with frameworks, not just inspiration. With practical skills, not just cautionary tales. With a network of allies who understand that the future of well-being will be written by those who show up to write it. And we will celebrate the people leading the way. The summit will present three awards designed to recognise and amplify outstanding contributions to this emerging field.

1. The IPPA Human Flourishing Tech Award honours AI tools and platforms that have demonstrably improved well-being through responsible design and evidence-based innovation.
2. The IPPA Excellence in Applied AI Practice Award recognises practitioners and teams who have made AI usable, understandable, and ethically grounded in real-world settings, whether in clinics, schools, or communities.
3. The IPPA Breakthrough Research in AI and Well-being Award celebrates scientific work that advances our understanding of how AI can serve human flourishing and translates those insights into practice or policy.

Nominations are open now and close on 15 January 2026. These awards are not just about recognition. They are about building a living archive of what responsible AI in positive psychology looks like, so that the next generation of researchers, practitioners, and technologists has a map to follow.

AI and the Future of Well-being (cont.)

The awards matter because they document what responsible AI in positive psychology looks like. But they also reveal something more profound. AI is remarkably good at what it was built to do: optimise performance, identify patterns, and scale interventions to millions of people. The technology works. What the technology cannot do is decide which outcomes are worth optimizing for in the first place. AI will amplify whatever we ask it to pursue. The question that will define our generation is whether we have the wisdom to know what to ask for.

That is why the integration of AI into positive psychology is not a technical problem to solve but a leadership challenge to embrace. It requires what I call professional technological humility, the recognition that AI systems function according to principles we were not trained to master, fail in ways we cannot predict, and encode values we do not immediately recognise. This is not about rejecting AI or worshipping it. It is about holding technology to the same evidentiary and ethical standards we demand of ourselves.

It is about understanding that knowing how to use a tool is fundamentally different from understanding how it thinks, what it assumes, and where it may cause harm. It is about cultivating the courage to say "I don't know" when we should, and the wisdom to recognise when our uncertainty makes AI inappropriate for a given context. The future of well-being will belong to those who can hold both the promise and the peril in their minds at once, who can see the potential without losing sight of the risk, who can lead with both vision and restraint. "We are the last generation that will get to decide what well-being means before the machines learn to optimise for it. That is not a warning. It is an invitation to lead."

Join us in March. This is the conversation our field was built to have, and the moment to have it is now. For more information about the conference and the awards, click [here](#).



Prof. Marius Stander: A Remarkable Academic and Researcher!

Prof. Marius Stander looks back with a broad smile on 46 remarkable years as part of the NWU community (formerly PUK), and especially the Vanderbijlpark Campus. After completing his military service in January 1979, his options were limited, as most university residences were already full. Although it was not his first choice, he enrolled for a BCom at the “Vaal” campus — a decision that ultimately proved to be an excellent one.

Marius is a proud alumnus and a pioneer, being the first in many respects. As a first-year student in 1979, he and Rens van Rensburg, a Sotho lecturer, visited the land next to the river that would later become the campus, dreaming of one day having a rugby field there. (Rens, who sadly passed away during the week of 8 December 2025). Marius became the first secretary and a founding member of the Watuni Rugby Club, as well as a first-team player. He represented the campus in athletics, rugby, and cricket. As Chairperson of the Student Council, he became the first to represent the Vaal campus independently from Potchefstroom. His student leadership team was also the first to host part of the first-year orientation at the still undeveloped river campus — long before any buildings existed.

Moving to Potchefstroom for his Honours degree, Marius was among the first residents of Patria Residence and part of its first rugby team. Later, as a lecturer, he was the first coach of the De Wilgers Residence in the campus's first inter-residence rugby competition. As the chairperson of the Student Council, he was the first chair to represent the campus independently from the Potchefstroom Campus. As a student council, they were the first to conduct part of the first-year orientation on the river campus. He met his first (and only) wife on campus. He completed his honours in Potchefstroom in 1981, with Prof. Ian Rothmann as a classmate.

Marius was appointed as a junior lecturer at the Potchefstroom campus in 1983 and returned to Vanderbijlpark in 1985. By 2026, he will have had the privilege of training master's students for 40 years. His years at the Vanderbijlpark campus included many more “firsts”: he received the first teaching award, was named the first Personality of the Year, served on the first Alumni Committee, and became the first campus convocation representative to serve as an exco member of the NWU Convocation — a position he held for three terms. During one of these terms, the exco initiated the first Bi-annual Alumni Awards.

Throughout his academic career, he was actively involved in the growth of the Vanderbijlpark campus. He was appointed at a young age as Head of the Industrial Psychology Department and played an active role in the Senate, Faculty Board, campus strategy, sport, people development, and transformation committees. He was assigned to explore academic leadership development in Europe and served on the management committees of several professional bodies, including the IPM, SABPP, BMF, PsySSA, the Vaal HR Forum, the Vaal L&D Forum, various School Governing Bodies, and the District Education and Training Unit of the Gauteng Department of Education.



Prof. Marius Stander and colleagues at an Optentia planning session

Prof. Marius Stander: A Remarkable Academic and Researcher!

Marius was part of the team that established the first honours programme in Industrial Psychology on the campus. He was instrumental in creating an academic/practitioner network where all full-time honours and third-year students were placed in industries to gain practical exposure.

Marius is a Professor (NWU & Optentia Research Unit, South Africa) and an Industrial Psychologist specialising in the assessment and optimisation of talented people and teams. He is a C2-rated researcher with the National Research Foundation. His postgraduate teaching experience spans several institutions: Potchefstroom University for CHE, North-West University (Potchefstroom and Vaal Triangle campuses), the University of Johannesburg (previously RAU), the University of Namibia, and the Norwegian University of Science and Technology.

He has supervised more than 75 master's and doctoral students, examined over 150 dissertations and theses, and served as supervising psychologist for more than 70 interns. He has presented over 80 scientific papers, both nationally and internationally, and has published more than 50 peer-reviewed papers and book chapters. He has served as Section Editor and Editorial Board Member of the SA Journal of Industrial Psychology, and remains actively involved in reviewing for journals, conferences, and the NRF.

Marius is registered with the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA). He is a Mentor and Master Human Resource Practitioner with the SA Board for People Practices (SABPP). The Society for Industrial and Organisational Psychology of South Africa (SIOPSA) has awarded him Life-Long Honorary Membership for his contribution to the field. Over the past 40 years, he has consulted for more than 80 organisations across

Africa, the Middle East, the USA, Europe, China, and the broader Asia-Pacific region, specialising in leadership development, executive coaching, and the assessment and optimisation of talent and teams.

Although Marius plans to relocate to Stellenbosch to be closer to his children and grandchildren, retirement is not on his mind. He intends to remain actively involved in university work and consulting.

Marius has been a proud member of Optentia since its inception and looks forward to becoming an Extraordinary Professor from January 2026. Marius acknowledges the academic, practice, and personal mentorship he received from Prof. Alret Barnard, Joppie van Graan, Johann Coetzee, and Ian Rothmann.

He has been happily married to Annatjie for 42 years. They have two children, Ederick and Elizma — both Industrial Psychologists — a daughter-in-law, Tasmin, and two grandchildren, Mila and Harper (soon to arrive).



Prof. Marius Stander and Dr Thapelo Chachaa

Honouring a Career of Inquiry at the North-West University by Prof. Ian Rothmann

Prof. Marius Stander has been at the heart of the Vanderbijlpark Campus for decades. When I think about what this campus has become, his influence is everywhere. The facilities, the stories, the history of our students and academics from the late seventies onward – he helped build and preserve all of it. People call him a legend here for a reason.

What I will remember is the way he brought people together. The simple moments around a cup of coffee or tea often turned into the best conversations of the day. He created spaces where people felt welcome and heard, and that's something rare.

His passion for developing others has shaped the field of industrial psychology in South Africa more than most people realise. Many psychologists practising today carry something they learned from him – his sharp thinking, his curiosity, and his belief in their potential.

For me, this goes beyond professional respect. Marius has been a conscientious, generous colleague and a true friend. When I went through one of the lowest points in my life, he showed up with quiet support and genuine care. That's something I will never forget.

And of course, his humour. It lightened long days and reminded us that work is also about being human with one another. As he retires, I know he will remain part of my life. I am grateful for the years we've shared, the example he set, and the friendship. Thankfully, Prof. Marius will continue contributing to the NWU after retirement!

Donderdag 1 Oktober 2009

Republikein

Navorsing kom oor geluk

GELUK en die kwaliteit van lewe in Suider-Afrikaanse lande is in die visier van 'n navorsingsprojek wat op Swakopmund van stapel gestuur is. Die navorsing kan 'n groot bydrae lewer tot mense se gesondheid, verhoudinge, motivering, produktiwiteit, asook die ekonomie.

Die sameroeper en projekteier van die omvattende navorsingsprojek is prof. Ian Rothmann, 'n buitengewone professor van die Noordwes-Universiteit op Potchefstroom en van die sakeonderneming Ian Rothmann & Associates op Swakopmund.

Die projekspan, bestaande uit professore en meesters- en doktorsgraadstudente van verskillende universiteite, het begin werk aan die beplanning van die navorsingsprojek oor geluk en kwaliteit van lewe in Namibië, Suid-Afrika, Zambië en Zimbabwe. Die navorsers se uitgangspunt is dat lewensvrede, plesier, begeestering en betekenis vier aspekte van geluk is wat nagevors behoort te word. Deur die navorsing wil hulle poog om indekse van geluk en kwaliteit van lewe te ontwikkel wat deur besluitnemers in plaaslike, provinsiale en nasionale regerings, asook in organisasies gebruik kan word om die kwaliteit van lewe en ekonomiese ontwikkeling in Suider-Afrika te bevorder.

Volgens die navorsers kan iets aan die werkers van 'n maatskappy se vlakke van geluk doen as werkgewers weet wat daardie vlakke is. Daar word hoofsaaklik op die ekonomie van 'n onderneming gefokus, terwyl die vlakke van geluk van die werkers onbekend is.

Die navorsing het ontstaan uit navorsing oor uitbranding wat die negatiewe kant van geluk is.

'n Gelukkige werker is 'n produktiewe werker en gaan volgens die navorsers in die toekoms 'n groter rol speel.



Die navorsingspan wat op Swakopmund begin beplan het aan 'n navorsingsprojek oor geluk is voor van links, mee. Candice Baumann (student, Unam), Charmaine Kasuto (student, Unam), dr. Lené Jorgensen (NWU), prof. Joey Buitendach (Unam), me. Martina Perstling (student, Unam) en mnr. Lukondo Hamukangandu (student, Unam). Agter is van links mnr. Siegfried Lange (Unam), prof. Marius Stander (NWU), prof. Rothmann, mnr. Llewellyn van Zyl (student, NWU, Vanderbijlparkcampus) en mnr. Coen Welsh (student, Unam).

Foto: Anneli Erasmus.

WILDE GANZEN EDUCATION

Celebrating Prof. Marita Heyns and Her Ongoing Contribution to Optentia by Prof. Ian Rothmann

At the end of December 2025, Prof. Marita Heyns steps out of her full-time academic role at Optentia. Her retirement marks the close of a significant chapter, but not the end of her involvement. We are grateful that she will remain connected to the unit as an extraordinary professor, continuing to share her expertise and support our work.

Prof. Heyns joined the North-West University in 2009 as a lecturer at the NWU Business School, where she earned the Institutional Award for Teaching Excellence. Her academic path reflects both depth and versatility, with a PhD in Psychology, a master's degree in clinical psychology, and an MBA. She entered Optentia in 2017 and has since played a central role in our research and teaching environment. She managed the Master's in Positive Psychology Programme and later led the Strengths-based Studies and Interventions sub-programme. Throughout this period, she invested heavily in her own methodological development, completing advanced training in Mplus, structured literature review methods, ATLAS.ti, and AI-supported research processes.

Her research record is substantial. To date, she has published 55 articles and a book chapter, with work appearing in respected international journals such as *Frontiers in Psychology*, *Psychological Reports*, and the *Nordic Journal of Music Therapy*. She has also contributed to nationally accredited journals, peer-reviewed conference proceedings, and a wide range of international research engagements. Her citation profile—1,207 citations, an h-index of 19, and an i10-index of 21—reflects both consistency and reach in her field.



Prof. Marita Heyns

Marita has supervised one postdoctoral project, guided 43 master's students to completion, and supervised two completed PhDs, with three more postgraduate students currently under her supervision.

What stands out just as much as her academic output is her commitment to people. She has been a steady presence for young academics, an attentive supervisor, and a trusted source of methodological and conceptual insight. These strengths, together with her NRF C2 rating, make her continued association with Optentia especially valuable. We look forward to drawing on her experience in mentoring, PhD supervision, high-level research advice, and future publications. Although stepping away from a full-time position can be a difficult transition for someone who has invested so deeply in academic work, her influence will remain part of the unit's everyday life. We are thankful for her years of service, her dedication to advancing researchers, and her willingness to continue contributing to Optentia's future.

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New Book on Capabilities at Work

We are pleased to share that a new book, *Capabilities at Work: The Added Value of the Capability Model for Well-Being and Work*, edited by Prof. Jac van der Klink and Prof. Sebastiaan Rothmann, is scheduled for publication by Cambridge University Press in 2026. The volume brings together contributions from more than 30 authors across 15 chapters.

1. Clarifying and expanding the capability approach for work. Early chapters set the foundation. They explain why the capability approach matters for understanding work and how it differs from standard HR, economics, or well-being models. The theme is building a shared conceptual foundation that connects capability theory to real-world situations.
2. Justice as a core dimension of capability at work. Several chapters treat justice not as an add-on but as a central part of capability. The theme is that work capabilities cannot be separated from questions about fairness, power, and institutional responsibility.
3. Tension between measuring capabilities and respecting complexity. You need indicators to inform action, but measuring freedom and choice always risks oversimplifying what matters. The theme is that capability assessment is necessary but never straightforward.
4. Connecting the capability approach with organisational practice. A block of chapters examines how the theory plays out within organisations. These chapters show how capability ideas can guide HR policies, leadership behaviour, job design, and organisational support systems. The theme is turning abstract capability principles into practical tools for managers, leaders, and workers.

5. Cross-cultural, occupational, and global perspectives. The capability approach doesn't look the same everywhere, and several chapters take that seriously. The theme is that capabilities depend on cultural norms, histories, structural inequalities, and the type of work being done. A universal framework needs contextual understanding.
6. Integrating the capability approach with broader social, economic, and political forces. The final chapter on digitalisation, globalisation, and climate change asks how capability-based thinking prepares us for future work conditions. This links individual and organisational concerns to global transformations. The theme is that work capabilities are shaped by broad societal changes, not only by workplaces themselves.

A recurring idea is that human flourishing is the goal of work. Across almost all chapters, there's a shared assumption that work should support people's ability to lead meaningful lives. Whether through justice, organisational design, cultural sensitivity, or leadership, the end point is human development rather than pure productivity.



Prof. Ian Rothmann and Prof. Jac van der Klink finalised the *Capabilities at Work* book in September 2025

The Mentorship Journey: The Launch of the Men- torship Short Courses for Support Staff Members *by Kele Ramagaga*

As part of our ongoing commitment to staff development across the university, we are delighted to announce the successful launch of two hybrid short courses designed to strengthen support staff capabilities and enhance our mentoring capacity. With the institution currently undergoing significant restructuring, this initiative arrives at a crucial moment, equipping staff with the tools to navigate change, build new competencies, and contribute to a culture of growth, collaboration, and lifelong learning.

Our continued partnership with People and Culture (P&C) remains central to the success of these programmes. While the initial plan was to train 80 staff members, which involved 40 academic and 40 support staff, during the launch, P&C generously increased the funding allocation by providing 10 additional places. This expansion was significant due to the strong interest and high volume of applications received across the three campuses.

The launch programme itself was inspiring and empowering. Prof. Lebo Gafana-Matemané from the School of Health Sciences emphasised the importance of trust and empathy as the cornerstones of meaningful mentoring relationships. We were further honoured by the presence of Prof. Linda du Plessis, Senior Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Teaching and Learning, and Ms Andiswa Msi, Director of Academic Solutions, both of whom underscored the vital role of investing in the university's human capital. Ms Msi also highlighted that meaningful institutional change relies on strong collaboration between academic and support staff.

Our course facilitators, Prof. Ian Rothmann and Dr Neil Barnard, offered valuable insights that set the tone for the journey ahead. Prof. Rothmann reminded us that mentorship fuels a positive cycle of growth, fairness, and well-being. Dr. Barnard emphasised the power of a growth mindset in shaping how we approach challenges, the influence of our environment on the opportunities we can access, and the importance of resilience and external support for sustainable thriving.

In her closing remarks, Prof. Mirna Nel, Deputy Dean for Research and Innovation in the Faculty of Humanities, reflected on the significance of this moment for the broader university community, as the initiative continues to expand, marking an important step toward strengthening a culture of mentorship and professional development.



Click [here](#) to read more about the launch of the mentor and mentee short courses for professional and support staff in higher education institutions.

The Next Phase of the Mentorship Journey (cont.)

I want to extend my heartfelt appreciation to everyone who contributed to making the launch a success. Special thanks to Ms Lynn Booysen, Anjonet Jordan, and the dedicated team in People and Culture Ms Helen Lekalakala, Mr Ronewa Rokho and Ms Tshepi Sizane, whose collaboration and commitment made this event possible.

Although I was unable to attend the launch in person, I look forward to meeting the current cohort during our contact sessions and engaging with many more staff members as we continue this important work together. We are excited about the year ahead as we continue offering both the academic and support staff mentorship short course.



You can watch a video about the launch of the short courses for support staff [here](#). For more information about the short courses, click [here](#).



GP van Rheede van Oudtshoorn Dr Neil Barnard, Prof. Ian Rothmann, Prof. Lebo Gafane-Matemane, Mrs Helen Lekalakala, Prof. Linda du Plessis, Ms Andiswa Msi, and Prof. Mirna Nel

Optentia Book Launches

The launch of the book "Global Perspectives on Job Insecurity in Higher Education: Precarity in the Ivory Tower" by Optentia-affiliated researchers, namely Prof. Lara C Roll, Prof. Hans de Witte and Prof. Ian Rothmann, was recently hosted by Optentia.

This compelling book delves into the damaging effects of job insecurity in higher education across ten countries. The book sheds light on its profound implications for individuals and institutions. Exploring the associations between job insecurity and critical factors such as health, well-being, and performance underscores the urgent need for effective intervention measures. The book also highlights the ripple effects of job insecurity on academic staff, researchers, PhD and postdoctoral students, and administrative and support staff, ultimately affecting the quality of education. Featuring the largest cross-country data collection on this topic to date, this collaborative effort brings together leading international researchers to provide novel insights. Each chapter offers unique comparative analyses, making the book a vital resource for academics, policymakers, students, and readers worldwide who are invested in the future of higher education. It is both a call to action and a foundation for further research in this critical area.



You can watch a video about the book launch [here](#).

Staff members, students and stakeholders of the North-West University (NWU) gathered on the Potchefstroom Campus on 2 October to celebrate the launch of the second edition of the book *Community Psychology: Global Crisis, Local Realities, and Action Global Crises*.

The event highlighted the collaborative spirit underpinning the publication, with several contributors offering concise presentations that illustrated how their chapters collectively reinforce the book's central theme of global interconnectedness and its relevance to community psychology in contemporary contexts. Click [here](#) to read more.

Click [here](#) to watch a video about the launch of the book. Duncan, N., Roos, V., & Pillay, J. (2025). *Community Psychology: Global Crises, Local Realities, and Action*. Juta (Pty) Limited.



Prof. Jace Pillay, Prof. Norman Duncan, Mr GP van Rheede Van Oudtshoorn (chair), Prof. Curwyn Mapaling (discussant), and Prof. Vera Roos

News in Brief

Optentia had various reasons to celebrate this year. First, five Optentia PhD students were awarded PhDs in May 2025: Dr Vedhna Dayanand-Lalla (PhD – Social Work), Dr Praise Choeni (PhD – Industrial Psychology), Dr Carol-Ann Dixon (PhD – Social Sciences), Dr Jeanie Cavé (PhD – Social Sciences), and Dr Rutger Kotze (PhD in Industrial Psychology). During September 2025, Optentia celebrated the completion of these PhD students' theses.



Optentia PhDs and staff celebrating the completion of PhD studies

On 30 September 2025, Prof. Ian Rothmann met Prof. Llewellyn van Zyl in the Netherlands. We thank Llewellyn, an extraordinary professor at Optentia, for his excellent work, support, and contributions.



Prof. Ian Rothmann and Prof. Llewellyn van Zyl

On 15 October 2025, Optentia representatives met with Mr Letshego Mokeki (Director - Career Development, DHET) and his colleague, Mrs Lesego Aphane, for a productive meeting. We are looking forward to collaborating with Letshego and colleagues to tackle the themes of unemployment, decent work, and capability development in South Africa!



Prof. Ian Rothmann, Prof. Blessed Ngwenya, Mrs Lesego Aphane, Mr Letshego Mokeki, Dr Neil Barnard

Two Optentia researchers, Prof. Ian Rothmann and Prof. Elmarie Deacon, received excellence awards for obtaining National Research Foundation ratings.



Prof. Ian Rothmann and Prof. Elmarie Deacon

Welcoming the New PhD Cohort to Optentia

Optentia is pleased to welcome the 14 doctoral candidates selected to begin their PhD studies in 2025. Their arrival brings the PhD group to 60 students and marks an encouraging step in the unit's ongoing work to build research that matters.

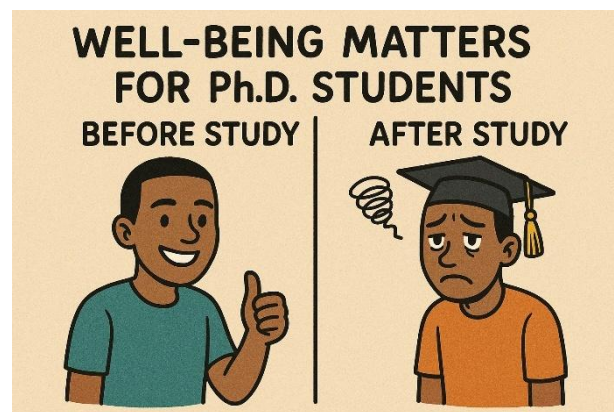
Starting a PhD is a significant commitment. It asks for focus, curiosity and steady habits that support both progress and well-being. New candidates are encouraged to stay in regular contact with their supervisors, set realistic goals for each stage of the research process and build routines that leave space for reading, writing and recovery. Peer support also plays an important role. Many students find that sharing challenges with fellow researchers helps them stay grounded and motivated.

The Optentia environment is structured to help students succeed, but each student's own rhythm and balance remain essential. Paying attention to workload, asking for guidance early and keeping sight of the purpose behind the research can make a noticeable difference over the long run.

We wish the new cohort a strong start and look forward to the contributions they will bring to the Optentia community. The following PhD students will begin their studies in January 2026:

PhD in Industrial Psychology

- Anina Coetzee
- Jennifer Mmatlou
- Mamello Mopeli,
- Happiness Nonjabulo



- Patience Rammutla
- Phodisho Thubakgale
- Martha Zondi

PhD in Human Resource Management and Labour Relations

- Zipho Brandon Maphumulo,
- Mataboho Ramaite

PhD in Social Sciences:

- Charmaine Kasuto (Inclusion and Development)
- Ian Magill (Inclusion and Development)
- Charlese McMillan (Ageing and Development)
- Gosiamo Noge (Inclusion and Development)
- Edzani Phiri (Ageing and Development)

Four PhD students have submitted their theses for examination:

- Olga Channing (PhD in Social Sciences with Inclusion and Development)
- Sibusiso Mnxuma (PhD in Industrial Psychology)
- Ivan Putter (PhD in Industrial Psychology)
- Coen Welsh (PhD in Industrial Psychology).

Alumni Award for Prof. Ian Rothmann

On 30 October 2025, Prof. Ian Rothmann received the Alumni Award for research from the North-West University (NWU).

Prof. Rothmann expressed his gratitude to the NWU Alumni Association for the recognition, noting how meaningful it was to stand there as part of the university's history. He explained that the NWU — still known as Potchefstroom University when he began his studies — was the place where many formative experiences took shape. According to him, this was where he learned to stand on his own, gained confidence in his abilities and discovered the value of connecting with others. He added that his years at the university helped him understand what it means to become capable: to grow through values, to make use of opportunity and to realise, through the guidance of mentors, that success rests on more than talent or hard work alone. These experiences strengthened his belief that education should enable people to flourish, not just achieve.

Prof. Rothmann reflected on arriving at the Potchefstroom train station in January 1978 after a three-day train journey from Windhoek, Namibia, and on sharing a residence room with two fellow B.Com students. Recently, after 47 years, the three, Hardus van Pletzen, Johan Erasmus and Ian, met again. Their careers had diverged, but the same sense of respect, acceptance and belonging remained. For him, this moment illustrated how deeply the NWU had nurtured values that endure. He said that this, more than anything else, represents the university's true legacy: shaping not only what people know, but how they see one another and how they choose to live.

Prof. Rothmann thanked the NWU for the honour and noted that the recognition carries special weight because the university helped shape both his career and his

thinking about people, work and learning. To be acknowledged by the same community that formed those foundations, he said, feels especially meaningful.

Click [here](#) to learn more about this year's event. Watch a video of the Alumni Award to Prof. Ian Rothmann [here](#) (from 3:13 on the video).



Prof. Ian Rothmann



Three roommates at the Klooster Men's Residence (1978) in Pretoria (October 2025): Hardus van Pletzen, Johan Erasmus and Ian Rothmann

At the NWU, the Alumni Awards are part of a formal programme that recognises graduates who have achieved distinction in their careers and made strong contributions to society. They are offered every two years as the Biennial Alumni Excellence Awards.

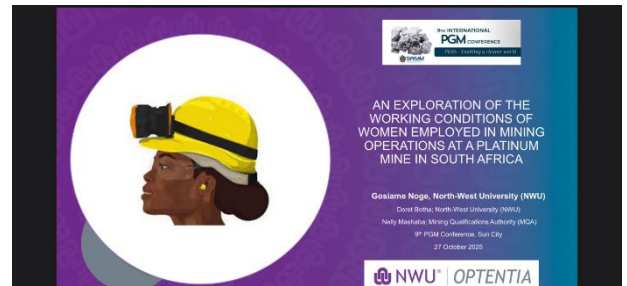
The 9th International Platinum Group Metals Conference *by Gosiamo Noge*

I recently had the privilege of presenting my master's research at the 9th International Platinum Group Metals (PGM) Conference, held from 27–28 October 2025 in Sun City. NWU proudly served as one of the event sponsors, and my abstract, "An exploration of the working conditions of women employed in mining operations at a platinum mine in South Africa", was accepted for presentation under the Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) Parallel Session.

During my presentation, I shared insights from my study on the lived working conditions of women in both underground and surface mining operations. Although South Africa's mining legislation has significantly evolved since the late 1990s, my findings show that many women continue to face gendered challenges, including inadequate facilities and PPE, limited career advancement, cultural barriers, and gaps between policy and practice. My presentation emphasised the need for more robust gender-responsive systems, particularly as companies adopt enhanced Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) standards.

Presenting these findings to industry leaders, researchers, and policymakers was an honour and a critical opportunity to contribute to conversations about social performance, gender inclusion, and sustainable mining. I am deeply grateful to NWU for its support and proud to have represented the institution on such a significant platform.

This experience has strengthened my commitment to advancing gender equity in STEM and mining through my research, and it marks an exciting step as I transition into my PhD journey.



Gosiame Noge at the Conference



A Journey of Growth, Gratitude, and Human Flourishing by Dr Neil Barnard

This year has been both challenging and deeply rewarding. Fortunately, my understanding of demands and challenges has evolved. I have come to see more clearly how the very things that stretch us can also become resources, invite growth and open up opportunities to live a life aligned with what matters most. Over the past year, I have been pushed to grow not only as a researcher but as a person navigating multiple roles with intention and purpose.

Balancing the responsibilities of researcher, lecturer, husband, and father has at times stretched my personal capacity. Yet these pressures have taught me invaluable lessons: to think critically, solve problems creatively, and remain present for the people and work that matter most. I continue striving to be an impactful academic; one who inspires curiosity and confidence in master's students, conducts research that contributes meaningfully (even in small ways), and helps create an environment where emerging researchers feel supported and motivated to pursue purposeful work.

Equally important to me is being the father my daughters deserve: a guide, a challenger, and someone who creates opportunities for them to build lives they find meaningful. This requires not only time, but intentional reflection on who I am becoming and the example I set for them.

The people at Optentia, especially Prof. Ian Rothmann, play a central role in my journey. I still remember the day I phoned him to say I would resign within two days to pursue a career in academia and asked whether he would walk that path with me as my mentor. Since then, I have completed my PhD, secured a permanent university position, and taken on the role of programme leader for Human

Flourishing in Institutions, and became the father of a beautiful daughter, with another on the way. Yes, I worked extremely hard, but I would not be where I am today without the unwavering support and opportunities provided by Optentia and by Prof. Ian.

As Prof. Ian's term as Research Director comes to an end, I feel profound sadness. Yet I am reassured to know that the impact he has had on people's lives, the university, the research unit, and society will continue to flourish. He has created a legacy that will endure far beyond his term.

Thank you, Prof. Ian, for your part in my professional journey and for the lessons I carry with me beyond the workplace. You have more than fulfilled the mentorship role I once asked you to take on, and our journey together is far from over. I hope that one day I can be the kind of mentor you would be proud of; someone who gives back what I have received with such generosity.

Prof. Ian and Optentia will always remain central to my story, and I look forward to contributing to the next chapter of the legacy we are building together.



Dr Neil Barnard

Visit to the Netherlands by Prof. Ian Rothmann

In September 2025, I visited colleagues in the Netherlands, beginning with a visit to Prof. Jac van der Klink. During this trip, we received the foreword for our book *Capabilities at Work* from two experts, one from the Netherlands and one from South Africa.

Meet Marianne Holleman

Marianne's ambition is to change norms that stand in the way of equal opportunities and rights. In doing so, she wants to facilitate personal leadership, establish and strengthen cooperation, shape innovation and make optimal use of talents.

In her role as Director of The Knowledge Centre for Labour Expertise (AKC) in the Netherlands, she is responsible for the knowledge centre aimed at strengthening professionals in achieving labour participation of people with a vulnerable labour market position, by developing knowledge through scientific research, promoting knowledge sharing, being a connector of research with practice, and translating developments to the profession.

Her academic background and research interests are in human resource management and Change Management, and she holds an Executive MBA.



Marianne Holleman

We are thankful to Marianne, who made a substantial financial contribution that enabled the book to be published as open access.

Capability book foreword

Prof. Valerie Møller (Professor Emeritus in Quality of Life Studies at the Institute of Social and Economic Research, Rhodes University) collaborated with Marianne Holleman to write the book's foreword. We are deeply grateful for their beautiful written contribution.



Prof. Valerie Møller

Visit to Tilburg University

At Tilburg University, I met my colleague at Optentia, Kele Ramagaga, Prof. Margot Joosen and Prof. Evelien Brouwers. We aim to collaborate with them in research projects about work capabilities and hope to organise a symposium on work capabilities in South Africa in September 2026.



Prof. Evelien Brouwers, Ms Kele Ramagaga, Prof. Margot Joosen and Prof. Ian Rothmann

Women Who Lead with Courage, Community, and Decency by Dr Vedhna Dayanand-Lalla

In every realm of leadership, women continue to show that resilience and resolve can exist alongside compassion and integrity. I believe that women from ethnic and Indigenous communities carry the burden of intersecting identities. Yet, they lead with remarkable clarity and strength, drawing on their cultural roots and lived experiences. These women challenge limited notions of power and replace them with models rooted in *community, justice, and inclusivity*. They demonstrate that toughness does not erase empathy, and that power becomes even more meaningful when it honours diverse histories and voices. This is the leadership that drives us forward. We saw that in the incredible leadership of Dr Fatima Meer and Mama Winnie Mandela.

Gender-based violence and femicide were a reality in my community as I was growing up. I saw my neighbours and some members of my extended family being violently harmed and decided I wanted to do something about it. This year was significant for me, and my work on GBV-F intensified more than ever. Amidst all of this, I am reminded again of *community, justice, and inclusivity*. I am reminded that some people will do this for their own prestige, and Mel Robbins reminds me to “let them,” because for those of us who care about this, we will and must continue to do so for *community, justice, and inclusivity*.

This year, the lessons I learned were hard ones. I learned that standing up for what you believe in means that you will face resistance. And Maya Angelou teaches me that, yet still I must rise. I learned that diversity and inclusivity in our world are just words unless we take a stand to make them happen. Yet, still I must rise. I realised that sometimes tough decisions must be made, but they must be made with decency, and so I still rise. Most of all, I learned that there are many good people on this planet, and they are the ones I lean to for guidance, motivation, encouragement and a

sense of belief. It is through them that I still rise.

In the midst of these lessons, of rising, resisting, and choosing decency even when it is difficult, I am reminded that leadership is not a title, but the courage to stand firm in truth and community. It is shaped by those who refuse to look away, who refuse to be intimidated, and who refuse to be silent. And as Arundhati Roy reminds us with piercing clarity, “There’s really no such thing as the voiceless. There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard.”



Dr Vedhna Dayanand-Lalla

Dr Vedhna Dayanand-Lalla in the News

Dealing with gender-based violence in South Africa matters because it shapes everyday safety, limits people’s freedom, and signals deeper social and institutional failures that need consistent and collective action to change. Click [here](#) to watch a video about gender-based violence in South Africa.

Capabilities and Functionings Early Academics in South Africa

by Prof. Ian Rothmann

Researching the capabilities and functionings of early career academics in South Africa is an important research topic for various reasons:

- First, universities rely on a steady flow of new scholars, yet South Africa has a thin academic pipeline. Many doctoral graduates don't enter academia, and those who do often carry heavy teaching loads early in their careers.
- Second, early-career academics at under-resourced institutions often have weaker research support, slower promotion systems, and fewer international networks.
- Third, workload, precarity, and limited opportunities for advancement are common reasons early-career academics leave the sector. If institutions want to retain talent, they need a clear picture of which capabilities are supported and which are undermined.
- Fourth, South Africa's universities still face slow progress in diversifying the professoriate. Understanding the actual functionings of emerging scholars helps show why formal transformation policies haven't produced the expected results.

I am the promoter for PhD candidate Bianca Arendse at the University of Cape Town (UCT). The title of her PhD study is: "Baptism by fire": Capabilities and functionings of emerging academics in South Africa". Her research includes three studies: a) A scoping review investigating the subjective well-being of emerging academics; b) A qualitative study of the work values and contextual factors that

influence the capabilities and functionings of emerging academics; c) A quantitative study of the demands and resources, work capabilities and functionings of emerging academics. Bianca is currently writing up her scoping review after a year of intensive work with AS Review, Elicit AI, Zotero, and Atlas.ti. With solid progress on her first study, she will move on to the empirical work for the remaining two studies in 2026. On 7 September 2025, she presented some of her initial results at a UCT conference. It has been encouraging to see her growth as a researcher, and we look forward to completing the project and preparing her manuscripts for submission to peer-reviewed journals.



Prof. Ian Rothmann and Bianca Arendse



Workshop: Teaching with Research

From 24-25 October 2025, the Optentia Research Unit, in collaboration with the Research Support Department at the North-West University, and the Norwegian Institute of Technology, hosted a two-day workshop titled Teaching with Research, exploring ways to strengthen teaching through research-informed practices.

The workshop brought together university lecturers to examine how research is taught—and how teaching practice in this area can be strengthened. The focus was clear: strengthen research teaching and help students think more critically, especially when using AI tools. The sessions gave lecturers space to compare ideas, test new teaching approaches, and discuss how AI is changing how students learn. A big part of the discussion centred on helping students question information, understand the limits of AI tools, and make responsible decisions in their research.



Prof. Siw Tone Innstrand, Prof. Marit Christensen, Prof. Elrie Oosthuyzen, Prof. Leoni van der Vaart, Prof. Leon de Beer, Prof. Llewellyn van Zyl and Prof. Ian Rothmann

Hosted at Monate Game Lodge, the event offered space to share teaching approaches, test new ideas, and connect with colleagues working toward better methods education. Lessons on the appropriate use of artificial intelligence, learned from Prof. Llewellyn van Zyl, Prof. Leon de Beer, and Prof. Leoni van der Vaart, were priceless.



Participants at the Teaching with Research Workshop

Do Our Data Really Show 'Why'? Rethinking Mediation in Cross-Sectional Research *by Prof. Leoni van der Vaart*

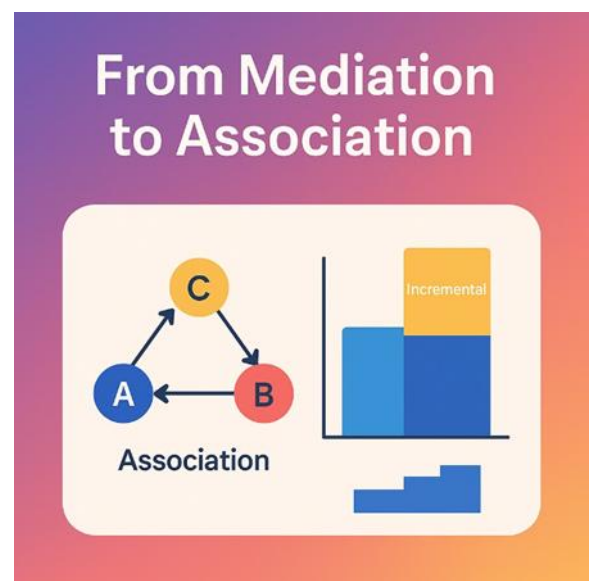
A recent paper by [Weems \(2025\)](#) confronts a quiet but essential problem in psychology and related fields: researchers routinely claim to test “mediation” – that is, why one variable affects another – using data collected at only one point in time and without any experiment. The author argues that such non-experimental cross-sectional mediation studies cannot tell us about causes or processes over time. Worse, we can even conclude the opposite of what happens when you follow people over time (i.e., longitudinally).

Despite strong warnings from methodologists, these studies remain common. Several reasons exist for this, but they typically include easy-to-use software, attractive graphics, and pressure to publish. Consequently, researchers are encouraged to treat sophisticated statistics as if they could compensate for weak designs. Calling these results “mediation” or “indirect effects” makes them sound causal, which risks misleading readers and undermining confidence in science.

As a constructive alternative, Weems (2025) proposes “associational variable analysis”. This framework uses the same statistical models as traditional mediation analysis but reframes the questions in strictly non-causal, incremental validity terms: does this additional variable account for extra variation in the association

between A and B, above and beyond what we already know? Does it add unique information, or change how the association looks when it is included?

Using examples from child anxiety research, Weems (2025) illustrates, step by step (see Table 1 for a summary), how to conduct association analyses and, more importantly, how to describe their findings more accurately. The message is clear: until we have proper experimental or longitudinal data, we should stop talking about “mediation” and instead use associational and incremental validity language that matches what our data can actually support.



Source: Illustration generated by GPT-5.1 (DALL·E)

Optentia Experts at the “Emerging Trends in Psychosocial Well-being” Conference

Two Optentia researchers, Prof. Ian Rothmann and Dr Vedhna Dayanand-Lalla presented papers at the International Conference on Emerging Trends in Psychosocial Well-being (21-23 October 2025) in Windhoek, Namibia. Also, Optentia had an exhibition at the conference.

On 21 October 2025, Prof. Ian Rothmann presented the following keynote address at the conference: “The Capability Approach, Decent Work, and Flourishing at Work: A Framework for Enhancing Psychosocial Well-being”. Prof. Rothmann made the following conclusions:

- When people have fair, secure, and purposeful work, it not only reduces stress and poverty but also builds hope, trust, and a shared sense of belonging.
- Capabilities are a prerequisite for accessing decent work. Once decent work has been attained, it serves as a platform to expand and strengthen those capabilities.
- Identify conversion gaps where resources do not translate into real opportunities.
- Craft systems and educational/ work environments that expand workers’ capabilities needed for work to be decent, and support flourishing.
- Coaching and mentoring are critical to assist people in crafting decent work and lives.

Click [here](#) to read more. You can watch a short video of a part of the presentation [here](#).



Prof. Ian Rothmann, Dr Annelisa Murangi, Dr Vedhna Dayanand-Lalla and Prof. Janet Ananias



Dr Vedhna-Dayanand-Lalla

Dr Vedhna Dayanand-Lalla presented an excellent paper: “Towards empowerment and flourishing of South African Indian women: 164 years after crossing the Kala Pani (Dark Water).”

Diabetes Awareness Month *by* Prof. Elmari Deacon

November is Diabetes Awareness Month, and in 2025, the SMILE with Diabetes project will be 20 years old!

The main findings of the past 10 years include:

1. What you think matters
1. Illness perceptions influence the adjustment to diabetes management behaviours across the lifespan.
2. Perceptions on living with the condition can be changed by using CBT.
2. You need to make sense of living with the condition
 - Parents can find meaning in supporting children in living with the condition.
 - Making meaning can lead to experiences of growth.
 - Illness perception is closely related to making sense of living with the condition.
3. Diabetes technologies can assist
 - CGM can lead to a sense of empowerment for adolescents living with T1D.
 - CGM can provide information to assist with self-regulation and goal setting in managing T1D.
 - Positive psychology interventions can assist in adjusting to diabetes technologies.
4. It is important to consider the developmental phase of the patient when discussing treatment plans
 - Adolescents feel different when diagnosed, but it is possible to integrate the condition into their identity.
 - Young adults need to be assisted to find new meaning in living with diabetes.

During October and November, I attended several conferences. I participated in numerous panels to emphasise the mental health aspects of living with diabetes, whilst raising awareness of the alternative narrative of living positively with diabetes. At PsySSA, from 13–16 October 2025, I shared findings from a study on stigma. I participated in a panel discussion on mental health and diabetes during the Second Mental Health Conference in Johannesburg on 30 October. In the week of 11–13 November 2025, I attended the Diabetes Summit in Johannesburg, where I presented on peer support, CGM access, and mental health in diabetes.

My message remains the same throughout: You can SMILE with diabetes!



Ageing and Relational Dynamics Research in Africa on the Agenda for 10 Years

This year (2025) marks a decade since the establishment of the Ageing and Relational Dynamics Research in Africa (AGenDA) programme within Optentia Research Unit. It, of course, took more than 10 years and many other stakeholders to, in a certain sense, come full circle in the mainstreaming of research on ageing in the world's youngest population-wise region.

AGenDA at 10

Ageing and Generational Dynamics in Africa Programme (2015–2025)

AGenDA was established as part of the Optentia Research Unit in 2015 under the leadership of Prof. Jaco Hoffman (NWU & Oxford Institute of Population Ageing) and Prof. Vera Roos. From the start, it framed ageing in Africa through a capability and life-course lens: moving from seeing older people as “burdens” to recognising them as rights-holders and contributors in families, communities and economies.

AGenDA quickly became a home for multi-disciplinary PhDs in ageing, development and relational dynamics, nurturing African scholars working on ageing in context.

Key Themes Over the Decade

- **From precarity to capability:** Documenting poverty, insecurity and thin safety nets in later life, then deliberately shifting to capability, agency and dignity as core concepts for policy and practice.
- **Generations in relation:** Studying how older and younger people rely on one another in households, communities and care systems, and how these

relationships can be strengthened rather than strained.

- **Care, presence and trauma:** Exploring long-term care (LTC) as an ethical practice grounded in *presence* and relationships and investigating how trauma and insecurity shape older people's well-being.

Signature Innovations

Age-inclusive digital ecosystems: A trilogy of projects under the leadership of Prof. Roos set a benchmark for age-inclusive ICT from the Global South:

- **IGNITe:** Showed how older South Africans use mobile phones and depend on younger relatives for digital support.
- **we-DELIVER:** Expanded this into several communities, mapping service needs and digital practices.
- **Yabelana ecosystem:** A co-designed directory (web, app, USSD) linking older persons to local services via both smart and basic phones; later recognised nationally (e.g., USAf Impact Case Study) and internationally (e.g., WSIS 2024 finalist).

Intergenerational Contact Zones

AGenDA helped conceptualise and implement intergenerational contact zones—intentional spaces and programmes where younger and older people interact, build solidarity and counter ageism.

Ageing and Relational Dynamics Research in Africa on the Agenda for 10 Years

Policy and Systems Influence

AGenDA's work fed directly into African and national policy frameworks:

- Contribution to the African Union Policy Framework and Plan of Action on Ageing and related regional processes.
- Input into Namibia's policy on the rights and protection of older persons and AU strategies on the social and solidarity economy.
- Development of a Long-Term Care Economy Strategy with Gauteng Provincial Government, positioning care as both a human-rights imperative and an employment and development opportunity.
- Co-direction of ILCSA (International Longevity Centre South Africa), linking research to practice through partners like UCT and GERATEC.

Through these channels, AGenDA helped institutionalise ageing in African policy debates rather than treating it as a marginal add-on.

Methods and Training

AGenDA is distinctive not only for what it studies, but how:

- Mmogo-method® and participatory, visual approaches pioneered by Prof. Roos – enabling older and younger people to co-create knowledge, grounded in African notions of togetherness and shared meaning-making.
- Relational, emic perspectives – emphasising insiders' experiences, presence theory and everyday care practices rather than purely institutional or biomedical views.

- PhD and early-career support – a steady stream of doctoral projects on LTC, intergenerational relations, technology, governance and trauma have seeded a new pan-African community of ageing scholars.
- Through a global scholarly community – sustained interdisciplinary collaboration within the Optentia Research Unit itself with figures like Andries Baart, Doris Bohman, Norah Keating, Isabella Aboderin, Johnny Strijdom, Anne Margriet Pot and others, as well as deep appreciation for pioneers like Monica Ferreira

From 2015 to 2025, AGenDA has grown from a new programme into a continental reference point for ageing and intergenerational research—tech-savvy, policy-engaged, methodologically innovative and deeply grounded in African lived realities.

AGenDA in 2025: Some Punctuations

This year, however, stands out as a highlight in terms of full-circle national and international engaged acknowledgement.

Lancet Commission on Long-Term Care for Older Persons

The Lancet Commission on Long-Term Care for Older Persons is an international group of experts, which includes Jaco Hoffman as Commissioner, convened by The Lancet to examine how long-term care (LTC) for older people works worldwide, expose gaps and rights violations, and propose practical ways to redesign LTC systems.

In the context of the UN Decade of Healthy Ageing (2021–2030), the Commission aims to:

- Create a global roadmap for person-centred, relational long-term care – care that starts from older people's values and goals and recognises that people are embedded in families, communities and care relationships, rather than as isolated "independent" individuals only.
- Put human rights and relational dignity at the centre of LTC, tackling situations where older people lose voice, respect, or meaningful connection with others.
- Support functional ability and relational agency – enabling older people, even with significant care needs, to influence decisions, negotiate support, and remain active participants in their relationships and communities.
- Promote integrated health and social care systems that also value the well-being of caregivers and the quality of care in relationships, not just services and infrastructure.

From 12–14 June 2025, the Commissioners, under the leadership of Prof. Anne Margriet Pot (Erasmus University, The Netherlands) and Prof. Kiran Rabheru (University of Ottawa, Canada), convened for an intensive workshopping of the first complete draft of the [report](#).



All the Commissioners with three affiliated with Optentia.



AGenDA in 2025: Some Punctuations

Lausanne Workshop on Priority Setting in Social Science Ageing Research

Jaco Hoffman was invited to contribute to a Delphi study hosted by the University of Lausanne in Switzerland (25 – 27 June 2025), focusing on identifying key priorities for future social science ageing research. This initiative, funded by the Velux Foundation's Healthy Ageing Program (<https://veluxstiftung.ch/>), seeks to leverage the insights of eminent experts to shape the direction of ageing research in the social sciences.

Over the last decades, social science ageing research has made significant contributions to a better understanding of healthy ageing and related policies. However, higher-level agenda-setting studies regarding future priorities for social science ageing research are currently lacking.

The Lausanne project, therefore, aims to identify current knowledge gaps and potential priority topics for future social science ageing research by soliciting perceived knowledge gaps and future research priorities from panels of academic and policy experts and the broader research community in the field.



South Africa National Department of Health

Jaco Hoffman facilitated the National Department of Health's work session on a National Policy Framework and Strategy (NPFS) from 30 to 31 July 2025.

The increase in the absolute number of older persons poses a challenge to the current health system because older persons are more prone to chronic diseases and are also more likely to experience disability than any other age group. Older persons are also amongst the poorest in South Africa, and they struggle to access much-needed health care because of poverty. The World Health Organisation encouraged countries to develop policy frameworks to address these challenges. In response to this, the National Department of Health hosted a National Consultation Workshop in Pretoria to finalise the draft National Policy Framework and Strategy for Older Persons.



AGenDA in 2025: Some Punctuations

Inclusive Research and Ageing in Place Practices

Prof. Vera Roos was invited to participate in HOMeAGE's 4th Network-Wide Training Event: Rights and Voice Meeting and Training Programme, 8-11 April 2025, at the Faculty of Humanities, Open University, Utrecht, The Netherlands. The focus of her presentation was specifically on making the voices of older persons heard: "Enhancing research participation among older adults: Applying the Mmogo method® in Low and Middle-income Countries" Click [here](#) for more information.



Prof. Vera Roos

Conference: Action on Ageing!

Against the backdrop of a rapidly ageing world, more than 500 thought leaders from 63 countries gathered in Cape Town for the International Federation on Ageing's 17th Global Conference on Ageing: *YEBO/YES! Action on Ageing: Evidence | Policy | Practice*, co-hosted by North-West University (NWU). This pivotal conference was the first global convening on ageing in Africa, uniting policymakers, researchers, practitioners, and advocates to advance solutions for age-friendly societies for all. The global population of older people is expected to exceed 2 billion by 2050. This conference provided a critical platform for action, especially for Africa, which will have the 3rd largest absolute number of older people in the world despite its youthful population: a small share of the total population but huge absolute numbers. Currently, South Africa has 6 million older people, and this number is estimated to rise to 12 million in 25 years.

Delegates explored innovations in creating age-friendly environments, advancing the rights of older persons, harnessing technology for inclusion and independence, and strengthening health through a focus on immunisation (with Prof. Jeffrey Mphlele as keynote), sensory and cognitive health, nutrition and long-term care, including the much-neglected care economy.



Prof. Jaco Hoffman at the IFA Conference

AGenDA in 2025: Some Punctuations

High-level side events, including the Age-Friendly Environments Collaborative Summit, a special convening to advance eye health co-hosted with Fred Hollows Foundation, an exploration of the role of Development Finance Institutions in investing in healthy ageing co-hosted with the Development Bank of Southern Africa as well as a first meeting of the BRICS + countries where already the majority of older people in the world reside, provided further opportunities for targeted discussions and action.

The opening greeting by the WHO Secretary General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the welcoming notes by the NWU VC, Prof. Bismark Tyobeka and the High Commissioner of Canada, Mr James Christoff as well as the keynote by Ms. Alana Officer, Unit Head of Demographic Change and Healthy Ageing at the World Health Organization, urged global action on ageing, particularly as countries fall behind on key milestones set out as part of the United Nations Decade of Healthy Ageing (2021 – 2030), which is now at its midpoint.

Through symposiums, workshops, paper presentations and working forums, participants explored solutions to pressing challenges such as improving access to care, enhancing age-inclusive policies, leveraging technology for older adults and advancing the inclusion of ageing within social development agendas. Vibrant networking opportunities reinforced the event's role as a global platform for collaboration.



Prof. Mirna Nel and Prof. Jaco Hoffman at the IFA Conference in Cape Town



Prof. Jaco Hoffman participating at an event during the IFA Conference



Anjonet Jordaan, Lynn Booysen and Prof. Mirna Nel at the Optentia Exhibition at the IFA Conference in Cape Town

AGenDA in 2025: Some Punctuations

Prof. Vera Roos reflects more personally on key moments at the 2025 International Federation on Ageing Conference, Cape Town:

Optentia regularly hosts affiliated researchers throughout the year, so there's usually a steady flow of visits,

conversations, and exchanges. But at the recent IFA conference, everyone seemed to land in Cape Town at the same time, creating a rare moment when colleagues from across projects and continents were suddenly in one place. It felt less like a formal gathering and more like a reunion of people who already share a way of thinking, a sense of purpose, and a commitment to ageing research.



Prof. Rayne Stroebel (back) and Prof. Kirti Ranchold (front), recently appointed extraordinary professors. Back, Ms Femada Shaman, CEO of TAFTA and master's student, Civil Legodu, Lowna Gie (front), PhD candidate, Prof. Japie Greef (back), Prof. Norah Keating (front), Prof. Ian Rothmann (3rd row), Prof. Dumi Moya (back), Prof. Vera Roos (front), Front, Prof. Sebastiana Kalula, and Prof. Jaco Hoffman.

AGenDA in 2025: Some Punctuations

Against the blood moon that appeared the night just before the conference began, the Bo-Kaap set the perfect scene for rekindling friendships and developing new ones.



Prof. Norah Keating, International Association of Gerontology and Geriatrics, Shanika Donalds, GEF Seniors Housing, Canada, and Prof. Vera Roos

Scholarly discussions blended with familiar check-ins, exchanging of gifts, confirmation of a shared interest and the spark of new research ideas.



There was also time to step away from the conference halls and enjoy the beauty around Cape Town.



Monique du Bree, Andries Baart, Vera Roos, Jaco Hoffman and Amanda Diener debriefing after the conference.

The IFA was also the ideal setting for presenting new research ideas. In her presentation, Conceptualising optimal caregiving from an interaction-centric approach in formal residential care ecologies (FRCE): Perspectives from South Africa, Dr Carol-Ann Dixon's presentation highlighted the need to rethink caregiving in FRCE by focusing on the interactions between older persons and care workers. She contributed the Care and Relational Dynamics (CaRD) framework, which offers a practical, flexible way to understand and improve relational caregiving. CaRD provides guidance for enhancing care quality through more attuned, respectful, and reciprocal interactions in FRCE.



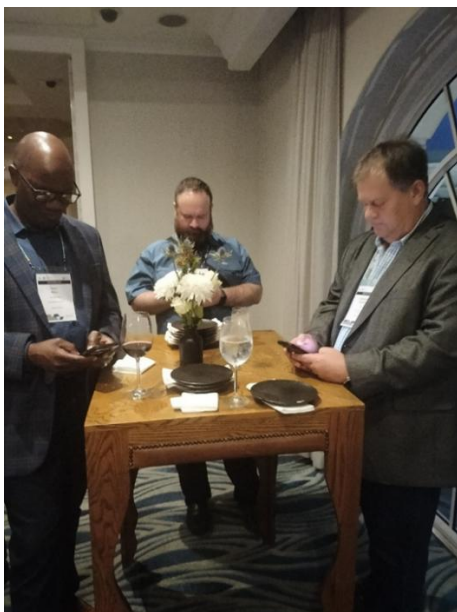
Profs Jaco Hoffman and Vera Roos with Carol-Ann Dixon

AGenDA in 2025: Some Punctuations



Prof. Vera Roos, Prof. Norah Keating and Dr Carol-Ann at Mama Africa

Technology and digital innovation were also key topics, especially regarding how digital tools can strengthen practice and improve functional abilities in older adults. Many participants acknowledged the potential of technology...



Prof. Dumi Moyo, Prof. Ian Rothmann and Prof. Japie Greeff

International Alliance of Research Universities (IARU) at Peking University, Beijing, China

As Steering Committee Member, Prof. Jaco Hoffman was invited to the Ageing, Health and Longevity work group of IARU. The International Alliance of Research Universities is a partnership between 11 universities, namely the University of Copenhagen, the Australian National University, the National University of Singapore, the University of Tokyo, the University of Cambridge, the University of Oxford, the University of California, Berkeley, Peking University, and the University of Cape Town.

The Ageing, Longevity & Health initiative (IARU-ALH) is one of the Alliance's earliest joint research initiatives. The group aims to provide novel insights and solutions to one of the most significant challenges and triumphs of the 21st century by leveraging its members' multidisciplinary expertise. The initiative addresses biological, psycho-social, cultural and public health policy issues arising from the unprecedented demographic shift associated with the global longevity transition.



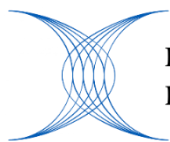
北京大学
PEKING UNIVERSITY

AGenDA in 2025: Some Punctuations

Aligned with IARU's commitment to promote sustainability, IARU-ALH was established as an interdisciplinary platform for research, education & capacity building, and intervention. The group takes a life-course and population-wide health perspective to help mitigate the negative impacts of demographic change and seize the opportunities afforded by a longer life. The overarching aim is to identify equitable and sustainable solutions to prevent health and ageing inequalities worldwide. That includes supporting low- and middle-income countries in building their capacity to respond to the challenges posed by an ageing population.

IARU-ALH focus areas are on the importance of the positive views of ageing:

- Healthy Ageing
- Active Ageing
- Productive Ageing



INTERNATIONAL ALLIANCE OF
RESEARCH UNIVERSITIES

On 10 October 2025, Prof. Jaco Hoffman specifically participated in a Roundtable on Global Ageing Governance and China's Response Strategy at the School of Economics, Peking University. This roundtable sought to provide a platform for dialogue between the China National Committee on Ageing and leading international experts. It focused on key issues in global ageing governance and China's policy priorities, aiming to deepen international collaboration and academic exchange, foster consensus, and jointly advance high-quality development in ageing-related initiatives.

Topics discussed were:

Ageing Trends and National Strategic Planning; Innovation in Long-Term Care and Social Support Systems and Technology Empowerment and the Future of Healthy Ageing.

Participants:

International Experts: Sarah Harper (University of Oxford), Jacobus Retief Hoffman (University of Oxford / NWU), Helgason Benedikt (Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich), Nicolas Cherbuin (Australian National University), Lene Juel Ramussen (University of Copenhagen), Katsuya Iijima (University of Tokyo), Adelina Comas-Herrera (London School of Economics and Science), Xi Chen (Yale University); Institute of Population Research, Peking University: Chen Gong (Professor, Director), Zhang Lei (Associate Professor, Deputy Director), Song Xinming (Professor), Han Qing (Assistant Professor), Zhang Xiao'ou (Research Assistant); China National Committee on Aging: Mr. Dong Pengtao (Director of Data Division, Policy Research Department), Mr. Li Zhihong (Director General of Policy Research Department).

AGenDA in 2025: Some Punctuations

Translate and localise; don't transplant

As Trustee of HelpAge International - <https://www.helpage.org/about-us/our-board/> - Jaco attended a Board Meeting, 26–29 October 2025, in Oxford, UK. He explored the idea of translational research with HelpAge International's board members and executive staff through a presentation titled "Translate, Don't Transplant: Bi-directional Pathways...".



The HelpAge Board, University College Senior Common Room, Oxford.

In the spirit of localisation and community engagement across ageing projects in Africa, he attended the HelpAge Ethiopia localisation/nationalisation launch. The organisation actively works across key thematic areas, including social protection, health and well-being, emergency response, and partner capacity building. During this time, Jaco also had the opportunity to explore the projects implemented by HelpAge Ethiopia and to engage with their initiatives, including their emergency response for older people in refugee centres on the border with (South) Sudan. The HelpAge International delegation also met with Her

Excellency Huria Ali Mahdi, Minister for Women and Social Affairs.



AGenDA in 2025: Some Punctuations

A Historic Milestone for the Continent

The Protocol, which entered into force on 4 November 2024, is the world's first binding human rights treaty dedicated exclusively to older persons. Its emergence marks Africa as a global pioneer, affirming that older persons are rights holders whose dignity and protection must be guaranteed. With 15 Member States now having ratified the instrument, momentum is building, and the continent is signalling a shift: ageing is not merely a welfare concern, it is a human rights issue.

The Protocol enshrines the rights to equality and non-discrimination, health, long-term care, social protection, freedom from abuse, and participation in public life. Importantly, it recognises intersecting vulnerabilities, including those faced by older women, rural older persons, and persons ageing with disabilities.

Key Reflections from Ordinary Session

The discussions in Banjul recognised both the achievements and the challenges that lie ahead.

Celebrating continental leadership: Africa's commitment to a binding legal framework demonstrates strong political will. The Protocol strengthens the legitimacy of older persons' voices in policy development and provides governments with a clear, actionable roadmap.

The implementation imperative: Ratification is only the first step. The true test lies in domestication, integrating the Protocol into national legislation, budgets, and programmes. Where civil society engagement is strong and governance is inclusive, we see faster progress. Peer learning among countries is emerging as a powerful catalyst for change.

Addressing intersectionality: There is a growing emphasis on the need to address the compounded vulnerabilities of older women, older persons with disabilities, and older persons in humanitarian contexts. Their realities must be reflected in both national and continental implementation strategies.

Bridging Regional Leadership With Global Human Rights Processes

A significant theme in the discussions was Africa's role in shaping the emerging UN global treaty on the rights of older persons. Guided by Article 60 of the African Charter, Africa is not only inspired by global human rights norms, but it is also actively contributing to their development.

The Older Persons Protocol, together with the Maputo Protocol's provisions on older women, offers a uniquely African framework that is gender-responsive, context-specific, and grounded in lived realities. These principles are now informing global discourse.

A Spotlight on the Rights of Older Women One of the persistent gaps we must confront is the marginalisation of older women. Too often they remain invisible in health systems, data collection, and public policy. The Protocol confronts this gap directly by demanding protection from violence, access to sexual and reproductive health information, and participation in decision-making spaces.

AGenDA in 2025: Some Punctuations

The Working Group reaffirmed that achieving meaningful change for older women is essential to achieving gender justice across the life course.

A Call to Action

The priorities for the continent are to:

- Accelerate ratification and domestication of the Protocol.
- Strengthen data systems to ensure age- and disability-disaggregated information.
- Build implementation roadmaps that translate commitments into measurable change.
- Support civil society and national human rights institutions in monitoring progress and driving awareness.

The Protocol gives us the legal door, now we must walk through it with urgency and resolve.

Looking Ahead

As Africa continues to lead on ageing rights, we must remember that older persons are not just beneficiaries of policy; they are agents of change, leaders, caregivers, knowledge keepers, and contributors to community resilience.

The work of the AU Technical Working Group remains rooted in this conviction: Ageing is a right-bearing stage of life, deserving of visibility, dignity, protection, and justice. The Protocol marks the beginning of a new era. Our collective responsibility is to ensure that it becomes a living instrument that transforms lives, not just a legal achievement, but a continent-wide movement.



New Funded Research Project: Framework for Understanding Neurocognitive Disorders via Indigenous Systems in South Africa (FUNDISA)

In partnership with Trinity College, Dublin we were successful in our funding application to the World Alzheimer's Association with our proposed project: "Framework for Understanding Neurocognitive Disorders via Indigenous Systems in South Africa (FUNDISA)".

Approximately 240,000 people live with dementia in South Africa, a number projected to rise by 181% by 2050. The prevalence of intellectual disability (ID), including DS, is higher in South Africa than in high-income countries. Most research is situated in the Global North, so little is known about the health needs and trajectories of people with DS in South Africa. People with DS have age-specific health comorbidities that differ from the general population, but a lack of awareness of this means that treatable conditions may go untreated.

The most notable comorbidity in DS is Alzheimer's disease (AD), which is universal in people with DS by age 40, with a 95% associated risk of clinical dementia by the seventh decade.

With over 200,000 traditional healing practitioners (THPs) in South Africa, far exceeding the approximately 46,000

Medical Doctors (MD), THPs are integral to the healthcare system, catering to 70-80% of the population, particularly in rural and marginalised communities where healthcare access may be limited. They play an important role in the care for people with DS and in the diagnosis and support of ADRD for the South African population.

Terminology, conceptual knowledge, and attitudes among THPs regarding ADRD, DS and ID remain largely unexplored. MDs and THPs often share patients, underscoring the need for a unified lexicon to enhance communication.

Against this backdrop, the project seeks to improve communication and understanding of Alzheimer's disease and related dementias (ADRD) and Down Syndrome (DS) by developing a framework to understand how these conditions are conceptualised across the healthcare ecosystem in South Africa.

From the 1st to the 3rd of December, we had our first meeting at the Nelson Mandela Foundation to tease out some of the remaining conceptual and methodological (not to mention epistemological) issues. This is a two-year project, and we were awarded around R4 000 000.00.

Prof. Eimear McGlinchey (Trinity), Prof. Kirti Ranchod (NWU), Dr Atholl Kleinhans (SMU), Prof. Jaco Hoffman (NWU), Dr Sinethemba Makanya (UJ), Prof. Miriam Galvin (Trinity), Bongiwe Lusizi (Atlantic Fellow), Khanya Ntsulumbana (SA Parliament). Absent, Prof. Rayne Stroebel (NWU).

Short Courses at Your Fingertips *by Prof. Ian Rothmann*

What the Optentia Glide App Is

The Optentia Glide app is a mobile and web-based platform that gives learners and mentors easy access to Optentia's short courses and resources. It is designed to be the home base for both mentors and mentees—where they can find information, follow structured pathways, and make decisions about their learning and development.

Core Capabilities

1. Access to Short Courses

- Direct entry points to Optentia's short courses, including those tailored for mentors and mentees.
- Structured pathways that guide users step by step, reducing confusion about what to do next.

2. Mentor and Mentee Hub

- Central space for all mentor/mentee-related information.
- Guidance materials, role expectations, and resources to strengthen mentoring relationships.
- Practical tools for reflection, goal setting, and progress tracking.

3. Decision-Making Support

- Helps users choose which courses or resources best fit their current needs.
- Provides clear options, summaries, and recommendations to make informed choices.

4. User-Friendly Access

- Works on smartphones and desktops—no need for heavy installations.
- Simple navigation, suitable for busy professionals who want quick, on-the-go access.

Why It Matters

The Glide app reduces barriers to entry for learning and mentoring. Instead of searching through scattered materials, mentors and mentees can go to one place for everything: courses, guidance, and decisions about their development.



Click [here](#) to find information about the Glide app and ways to access it.

Dr Fred Goede: Celebrating a PhD and Shaping the Publications That Follow

The highlight of 2025 for me – and of the past few years – was defending my PhD at Wageningen University in the Netherlands on 29 September. The public defence took place in the Omnia graduation hall and was attended by WUR staff and the rector designate. Several family members were there as well, together with colleagues from the North-West University, who also used the visit to present workshops at other universities on the future of applied risk management, the field in which I work.

Under the guidance of my supervisor, Prof. Dr *ir.* Gert Jan Hofstede, I prepared a 14-minute presentation, after which the opponents not only probed two of my propositions (that was fun!), but also on the thesis's content.

The first chapter captured the safety literature over the last 70 years and proposed a framework that reflects the complex socio-technical system of what we call safety management today. Despite significant advances in safety performance, the industry is often surprised by recurring fatalities, even today, frequently blamed on safety culture.

Next, I delved into a South African facility to understand the dynamic mechanisms of safety culture, actual behaviours, and why we take shortcuts on the coalface. Based on this qualitative assessment, a questionnaire was developed to measure safety behaviours in greater detail. Four major factors were further explored that are considered important in safety decision-making: knowledge, colleagues, bosses, and one's own motivation.

The industry usually responds to incidents with more knowledge training; yet neglects the behavioural aspects of the

workers. These factors provided the inputs to an agent-based model that is the heart of the study. The model is called "BeSafe" where "Be" refers to the BEhaviours of workers and why we take shortcuts. The power of a model is, of course, its ability to run different scenarios. I was able to simulate past and present scenarios and explore future scenarios as a useful guide to illustrate how different interventions influence safety outcomes.

The study is under embargo for now until I publish all the papers from it, to avoid debates with journal editors. The most exciting aspect of the study is to further engage with my students, academia, and industry on the results to see how we can avoid fatalities in the future.



Colleagues supporting Dr Fred Goede during his PhD defence

Building Optentia: What Stands Out After 15 Years *by* Prof. Ian Rothmann

My appointment as Director of Optentia ends on 31 December 2025. I thought it might be interesting to analyse and report my experiences as a director.

I joined the School of Industrial Psychology and Human Resource Management on 1 September 2010 with a clear brief: to build a research entity at the Vanderbijlpark Campus of the North-West University.

The whole story of Optentia's 15-year journey is longer than what fits here, so I focus on the themes that shaped its three phases of development. I also highlight a few achievements and some challenges that stood out along the way.



Prof. Ian Rothmann

For an overview of Optentia's development as a research unit, watch the video "The Anatomy of Growth" [here](#). The infographic provides a picture of three phases in the development of the research entity.



Building Optentia: The Achievements and Challenges by Prof. Ian Rothmann

Building Optentia has been a long process shaped by steady progress, clear achievements and a fair share of challenges. Over the years, the unit grew in scope, depth and visibility, supported by committed researchers, strong collaborations and a developing research philosophy. At the same time, the work brought moments that tested our direction and forced us to rethink how we operate. This brief reflection outlines what we gained along the way and what challenges we face.

Achievements

- The entity has built a clear vision, mission and brand that staff can understand and work with, and that gives direction to everyday decisions.
- A shared research philosophy supports collaboration across disciplines and makes multi- and interdisciplinary work possible.
- People development is central to the entity's strategy. Training in advanced research methods and tools is offered proactively, ensuring researchers are prepared before specific needs arise.
- Strong national and international networks provide opportunities for competence development, joint publications, well-being, and access to resources.
- Optentia creates a motivating environment for researchers. A culture that supports both belonging and uniqueness appears to help excellent researchers thrive.
- Researchers have access to the resources they need to produce good research. This includes access to key software tools—such as Elicit AI, Mplus, Jamovi, JASP, AS Review, ATLAS.ti, and SPSS—along with the training required to use them effectively.

- Optentia achieved significant success in supporting staff members without a PhD to complete their doctoral studies: Dr Neil Barnard, Dr Christiaan Bekker, Dr Thapelo Chachaa, Dr Lynelle Coxen, Dr Tamlynn Jefferis, Dr Vedhna Dayanand-Lalla, Prof. Leoni van der Vaart and Prof. Llewellyn van Zyl. One staff member (Sibusiso Mnxuma) has recently submitted his thesis for examination.
- The number of National Research Foundation (NRF)–rated researchers increased from one in 2010 to ten in 2025. Of these, three researchers (one permanently appointed and two on temporary appointments) hold B-ratings.
- Various researchers who previously held permanent appointments at Optentia are now appointed at other national and international institutions and are recognised for their research excellence: Prof. Linda Theron, Prof. Leoni van der Vaart, and Prof. Llewellyn van Zyl.

Challenges

- Retention of high-performing early-career researchers remains a challenge, partly due to working conditions and salary levels.
- Restricted travel funding, limited sabbatical opportunities, and weaker global networks reduce citation impact and collaborative opportunities.
- High demands, limited resources, and performance pressures undermine well-being and long-term productivity.

The quality of academic and support staff jobs is central to developing human potential, and retention and performance of staff. Incentives matter, but they are not enough. High-quality work depends on the use of knowledge and skills, development of new knowledge and skills, participation in decision-making, setting goals and supportive relationships. Without these conditions, well-being, and performance erode.

A New Exciting Phase for Optentia *by* Prof. Ian Rothmann

From 1 January 2026, I will take up the position of Research Professor at Optentia. I am grateful for this opportunity and look forward to advancing research on sustainable employability, together with a postdoctoral research fellow to be appointed.

The photograph in the garden of Optentia House has always held particular meaning for me. It speaks to pathways toward capability, while also evoking the image of a garden that is intentionally cared for. For me, it reflects what we aim to do at Optentia: to create environments where people can take root, grow, and move forward with direction and purpose.



I would like to wish the new Director of Optentia, Prof. Blessed Ngwenya, every success in this next phase of the entity's development. I look forward to working with him to support the development of researchers and to ensure that Optentia continues to serve as a meaningful asset to the North-West University.

About Prof. Blessed Ngwenya

Prof. Blessed Nhlanganiso Ngwenya is the newly appointed Research Director of the Optentia Research Unit at the North-West University. He is an Associate Professor and Programme Leader for Inclusion and Decolonial Praxis at Optentia. He holds

advanced qualifications in Communication and Media Studies and completed his DPhil in Socio-Legal Studies at the University of Oxford, complemented by further academic and professional development at Oxford and the University of the Witwatersrand.

Prof. Ngwenya is an experienced postgraduate supervisor and a recognised scholar in decoloniality, qualitative inquiry, media representation, cultural systems, and Global South epistemologies. He has published widely in leading journals and edited volumes and serves as an Associate Editor of the International Journal of Qualitative Methods. He is also the author of *The Myth of Independence: Media Power and Hegemony in South Africa* (Routledge), a significant contribution to debates on media, power, and coloniality.

His work is distinguished by a strong integration of theory and practice, including founding two community radio stations and leading initiatives such as the Tswala! Digital Divide Project. As Research Director, he brings a vision focused on research excellence, inclusivity, and socially engaged scholarship responsive to Global South contexts.



Prof. Blessed Ngwenya

Recommended Books and Chapters

- Ferdman, B.M., Prime, J., & Riggio, R.E. (2021). Inclusive leadership: Transforming diverse lives, workplaces and societies. Routledge.
- Grof, B. (2025). Today was fun: A book about work. Macmillan.
- Kross, E. (2025). Shift: How to manage your emotions so they don't manage you. Penguin Books.
- Mollick, E. (2024). Co-intelligence: Living and working with AI. Penguin Books.
- Oishi, S. (2025). Life in three dimensions. Penguin Books.



Optentia Colleagues at the end of the year function (1 December 2025)