

INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

Milestones that matter	2
Optentia pulse	2
Optentia Usiba	3
17 th Global Conference on Ageing	4
Navigating challenges in research	6
Pluralism in explaining why	7
Growth via mentorship	8
Empowering support staff	10
B1 rating for Prof. Ian Rothmann	11
Ghosting of well-being programs	12
Journeys of PhD candidates	13
Impact case study	17
The heart of academic life	18
Book launch: 5 May 2025	19
Behavioural risk program	20
Human forever	21
Optentia House	22
Recommended books	24



@NWUOptentia



www.optentia.co.za



@optentia

Grow, Connect, Contribute and Flourish

At Optentia, we understand that producing cutting-edge research is about individual excellence and creating an environment where academics can thrive. Growth, connection, and contribution do not happen auto-



matically - they require nurturing, support, and intentional opportunities. Yet, many researchers experience barriers: overwhelming workloads, feelings of isolation, systemic inequalities, and a lack of recognition can significantly limit their ability to realise their potential. Drawing on the capability approach, we recognise that true achievement stems from more than mere opportunity; it requires real freedom - the freedom to grow intellectually, to build meaningful professional relationships, and to contribute knowledge that makes a difference. Growth flourishes when academics are supported to pursue new skills, develop fresh ideas, and overcome obstacles. Connection becomes possible when a vibrant, inclusive community is built where everyone's contributions are respected and celebrated. Contribution thrives when researchers are empowered to share their unique insights and collaborate on solutions to complex challenges. Optentia is committed to fostering these essential freedoms. We believe that every academic has valuable potential waiting to be unlocked. Through mentoring, coaching, collaboration, and a culture of care, we aim to strengthen the capabilities of our researchers. In doing so, we support individual careers and contribute to knowledge creation that can transform societies. Together, we are building a future where researchers can survive the demands of academia and grow, connect, contribute, and ultimately flourish.

Optentia Achievements: 2025

Optentia has 27 primary and 15 secondary participants, 41 extraordinary professors, nine extraordinary researchers and one professor of practice. Our researchers published 43.34 peer-reviewed articles, book chapters, and conference papers. Most of Optentia's PhD students participated in a writing retreat from 22-25 April 2025.



The Optentia Scorecard

	2022	2023	2024	2025
Peer-reviewed article equivalents	98.09	67.40	81.91	43.34
Papers: Conferences	9	27	10	7
Participating master's students	34	63	77	75
Completed master's students	23	5	18	11
Participating PhD students	52	50	39	52
Completed PhD students	6	10	10	5
Number of workshops presented	10	19	11	2
Number of workshop participants	250	619	550	91
Number of mentors trained	-	-	59	19
Number of mentees trained	-	-	49	26

Optentia Pulse: Spotlights and Breaking News

- Optentia has invested in 25 licenses for Elicit AI in 2025. Access to the software is also provided on one computer in Optentia's Indaba.
- Participate in the IFA's 17th Global Conference on Ageing co-presented by the NWU. Access the website [here](#).
- Book launch on 5 May 2025 - 10:00: Relational Caring: A Soft Voice in Transforming Society. You can attend in person or on [YouTube](#).
- Watch a video about research in the Faculty of Humanities [here](#).
- Prof. B. Ngwenya has been appointed in a permanent position in Optentia.
- New peer-reviewed [book](#) "Global perspectives on job insecurity in higher education: Precarity in the ivory tower", edited by Roll, De Witte and Rothmann, to be published in June 2025.
- IRIMS training: 19 May 2025.
- Click [here](#) to watch the Optentia Usiba 2025 video! Handouts and slides are available [here](#). Select Optentia Usiba. Accessing the site requires a password: Contact Lynn Booyesen.

Optentia Usiba: Renewal and Research *by* Prof. Ian Rothmann

From 22 to 25 April 2025, the Optentia Research Unit at North-West University hosted a writing retreat at the scenic Khaya Ibhubesi Conference Centre in Parys. 62 participants have registered for the event, mostly PhD candidates and early career researchers affiliated with Optentia. As Optentia celebrates 15 years of growth, the Usiba Writing Retreat brought our founding vision to life - that developing people is the key to impactful research - by creating space to unlock the capabilities of our researchers, students, and staff.

The Optentia Usiba was a valuable opportunity for researchers to focus on their dissertations, theses, and academic publications in a supportive, distraction-free environment. A multidisciplinary team of local and international experts offered lectures, workshops, and one-on-one coaching on various topics, including qualitative and quantitative research methods, mixed methods, literature reviews using artificial intelligence (AI) tools, scientific writing, and research dissemination. Participants benefited from the expertise of renowned scholars (see www.optentia.co.za).

The Optentia Usiba focused on growth, connection, and contribution. By investing in developing emerging scholars and fostering a collaborative academic community, the writing retreat contributed meaningfully to the pursuit of research excellence at North-West University. It reflects Optentia's ongoing commitment to building capacity for impactful, socially relevant research.

Prof. Ian Rothmann reminded participants of four aspects: a) Writing is where thinking becomes real: It is not enough to have good ideas - those ideas only gain power when expressed, shared, and sharpened through writing. b) They are not alone: They are surrounded by a

supportive scholarly community that understands the journey and can walk it with them. c) Momentum matters: A few uninterrupted days of focused writing can unlock breakthroughs, shape chapters, and renew your sense of progress and purpose. d) Their voices matter: Optentia believes in research that changes lives. Their writing - their voice - contributes to that purpose.



Dr Bruno Messina Coimbra, Prof. JT Janse van Rensburg, Prof. Ian Rothmann, Prof. Llewellyn van Zyl, Prof. Leoni van der Vaart, Prof. Vera Roos and Dr Neil Barnard presented workshops at the Optentia Usiba 2025



76 people (including 40 PhD candidates) participated in the Optentia Usiba 2025.

Highlights of the Optentia Usiba 2025



The 17th Global Conference on Ageing, YEBO/YES! by Prof. Jaco Hoffman

We eagerly anticipate the 17th IFA conference, which will take place in Cape Town, South Africa, from 9-12 September 2025. The conference theme has inspired several presentations showcasing the research conducted by the Ageing and Generational Dynamics programme at the Optentia Research Unit.

Under the subtheme Long-term care and improving function, Carol-Ann Dixon and Vera Roos, Matthews Katjene and Jaco Hoffman, will present on *Conceptualising effective care outcomes involving care workers and older persons in formal residential care ecologies*. This presentation is set against a shift from service-oriented ('medicalised') care for older individuals to more person and relationship-centred models of care. As part of her PhD, Carol-Ann developed the Care and Relational Dynamics (Card) framework that guides caregiving. The Card framework fosters constructive and authentic

engagement between older persons and care workers, ultimately enhancing the quality of care holistically and inclusively.

Focussing on the practical promotion of healthy ageing, Johan Liebenberg and Vera Roos will present a two-hour workshop, titled: *Co-regulation of older persons in a chronic sympathetic state: A practical demonstration and psychoeducation*. The workshop is based on the premise that unresolved trauma disrupts the brain, immobilises the mind and manifests in various forms and locations throughout the body. In a practical session, techniques will be demonstrated to create conditions that foster an embodied sense of safety in the present moment.

Carol-Ann Dixon and Vera Roos will present a session on healthy ageing, Enhancing relational well-being in older adults through effective dialogue. This workshop will demonstrate how older couples can engage in effective dialogue to promote their relational well-being. Structured in three parts, the session will show how facilitators can create a safe space for meaningful dialogue

between an older couple while allowing attendees to engage in their experiential learning. Participants will explore different energy states and how varying perspectives inform the quality of dialogues.

Vera Roos will present a workshop, titled: *Active research participation of (older) individuals: The Mmogo method as an indigenous visual data-collection method*. This workshop will introduce the Mmogo-method, a visual data collection technique grounded in the concept of 'mmogo'—a word from one of South Africa's official languages that signifies togetherness, unity, and collective creation. Using unstructured materials and an open-ended prompt generates rich and detailed visual and textual data. The workshop will also explore key assumptions underpinning its application in LMICS, including recognising the diversity of older individuals across different cultural contexts; acknowledging socio-cultural norms guiding behaviour, including research conduct; and adapting research methods to respect the context and participants' situatedness.

Navigating Challenges in Psychological Research

Psychology researchers in South Africa face institutional, methodological, and professional development challenges. Institutional barriers include limited funding, inadequate infrastructure, administrative hurdles, and restricted publication opportunities. Methodological difficulties stem from reliance on Western models, culturally inappropriate tools, and poor methodological reporting. Professional development obstacles include insufficient training, unclear career paths, and high stress levels.

Prof. Curwyn Mapaling Joins Optentia

Holding the roles of associate professor in psychology, registered clinical psychologist, and contributing member of the Optentia Research Unit, Curwyn Mapaling directs his efforts towards strengthening resilience and other aspects of well-being in educational contexts. He is particularly committed to the Strengths-based Studies and Interventions programme, where his research emphasises how psychological insights can

Prof. Silvia Koller has invited Prof. Ian Rothmann to contribute a chapter to a book that explores strategies and challenges faced by researchers in psychology in the Global South. The chapter explores adaptive strategies, primarily institutional reforms, to overcome these challenges. Key strategies include integrating culturally relevant research methods, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches, fostering interdisciplinary collaboration, and linking research to academic curricula. While most strategies are implemented at the institutional level, few focus on individual or professional development, and none have been explicitly evaluated for effectiveness.

be practically applied in teaching, learning, and beyond.

He also serves as co-editor of the journal *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* (SOTL) in the South, reflecting his dedication to evidence-based approaches that enhance both student success and well-being. Having earned a PhD in Education, Curwyn takes an integrated approach to mental health, well-being, and instruction-spanning traditional psychology, broader education, and engineering education. Recognised as a Mandela Rhodes Scholar, YALI alum, and Abe Bailey Fellow, he endeavours



Prof. Ian Rothmann

Rothmann, S. (2025). Navigating challenges and advancing psychology research in South Africa: Strategies for innovation, collaboration, and global visibility. In A.B. Costa & S. Koller (Eds.), *Exploring strategies and challenges faced by researchers in psychology in the Global South*. Springer.

to make academic enquiry accessible and meaningful for students, educators, and communities. Curwyn strives to foster healthier, more supportive environments for all through a blend of clinical expertise and educational innovation.



Prof. Curwyn Mapaling

The Case for Pluralism in Explaining Why by Prof. Leoni van der Vaart

Understanding causal mechanisms is like looking at a clock through different lenses. Each perspective reveals new gears and movements that explain what makes it tick. In their [article](#), Cornelissen and Werner (2025) explore how management researchers conceptualise and study causal mechanisms in



Prof. Leoni van der Vaart

very different ways, yet often speak as if they mean the same thing. They outline three main approaches: the *Interventionist* (focused on variable manipulation and measurement), the *Contextual* (which traces rich, case-specific processes), and the *Constitutive* (which maps the internal components and dynamics of mechanisms across levels). Each view relies on different assumptions about reality, knowledge, and explanation (Table 2 in the article).

Instead of searching for a single 'correct' lens, the authors argue for

methodological pluralism, using multiple lenses to enrich how we understand cause and effect. They champion perspective-taking, encouraging researchers to step into others' epistemological shoes to see new angles and deepen their insights. In a world where mechanism-talk risks becoming a buzzword, this paper offers a timely call to think-methods-again.

We should not abandon rigour but recognise the value of diversity in uncovering organisations' inner workings.

Think – methods – Again



Growth via Mentorship by Kele Ramagaga

The mentorship and mentee programme concluded on a high note at the end of last year, with many participants successfully trained. This initiative continues to be instrumental in developing established academics and emerging scholars, fostering professional growth. Academic staff from multiple faculties have expressed eagerness to remain involved and contribute to its continued success, especially as we move forward with the upcoming phase focused on mentor-mentee pairing.

We are ready to commence the pairing process with the substantial number of individuals we have trained. In preparation, we have considered feedback and suggestions from trained mentors and mentees across all three campuses regarding how to proceed best. Key recommendations included: a) The development of an accessible database of mentors; b) Enablement of trained mentees to identify and connect with potential mentors; c) Publication of a regular newsletter, and d) Annual functions to strengthen relationships and encourage continued engagement.

They champion perspective-taking, encouraging researchers to step into others' epistemological shoes to see new angles and deepen their insights. In a world where

mechanism-talk risks becoming a buzzword, this paper offers a timely call to think-methods-again.

The programme has promoted cross-faculty mentorship, encouraging shared learning from various perspectives. Through the structured pairing process, this will encourage further mentorship relationships to grow across different faculties. Feedback from mentors and mentees during previous engagements highlighted the positive impact on academic staff. Many faculty members noted mentoring helped them strengthen relationships and clarify their professional purpose.

Ms Louise Wyma from the Faculty of Health Sciences, who was enrolled in the mentee programme, stated: "I reached a stage where I was just surviving and realised something needed to change. I did not know how to get unstuck.



Ms L. Wyma

At the first contact session, I told Kele, 'I'm not sure what we'll do in this course, but I can see Optentia group gets it!' The content changed my perspective — I'm not alone, and there are ways forward. The Optentia team can take academia

from languishing to flourishing! I wish this had been part of my induction; so much time could have been saved."

Dr Alexander Samuels, who was in the mentorship programme from the School of Transport Economics and Logistics Management, also noted the positive effects of mentoring on academic staff, stating that the course challenged his preconceptions and sparked a renewed passion for continuous learning, pushing me to explore uncharted territories in both my professional and personal life. He added that every session was a revelation for him, with mentors who provided wisdom, guidance, and encouragement to overcome challenges and embrace change. The insights and practical skills he gained have empowered him to navigate challenges with confidence and a more profound sense of purpose, leaving an indelible mark on his growth and self-awareness.



Dr A. Samuels

Growth via Mentorship (cont.)

Training programmes for mentors and mentees achieved great success the previous year, thanks to the significant support and coordination provided by the Learning and Development Specialist from People & Culture, North-West University, Mr Ronewa Rokho. His timely assistance and valuable contributions were crucial to the programme's success: "We are grateful to be part of the mentorship programme offered by Optentia. This well-established mentorship programme fostered a cooperative and supportive academic environment at

the NWU. We kept getting good comments from participants regarding the success of this mentorship programme, which provides seasoned academic staff members with a chance to impart their knowledge and insight to the upcoming generation of academics. We appreciate you for providing this fantastic programme."



Mr. Ronewa Rokho

As the quote says, "Mentorship is not a one-time event, but an ongoing relationship that promotes growth, insight, and shared success" (author unknown). The mission is to emphasise that mentorship is a continuous and evolving process, fostering long-term personal and professional development. As we have begun with the first cohort for this year, we are confident that as we establish mentoring relationships and expand mentorship across the university, we will achieve the vision of growth, insight, and mutual success.



Mentors and mentees at a meeting (Potchefstroom Campus)

Empowering Growth, Inspiring Academic Journeys

Empowering Support Staff in Universities by Prof. Ian Rothmann

The People and Culture Department at the North-West University (NWU) acknowledges the significant need for mentorship across academic and support staff as a key priority in its strategic plan. At the start of the year, a meeting was held to discuss the implementation of mentor and mentee short courses for support staff members at the NWU.

Support staff play a critical role in universities, creating spaces where teaching, research, and community engagement thrive. Yet their roles can be demanding, especially for those stepping into new or expanded responsibilities. Mentor programmes offer vital support,

helping staff grow skills, build confidence, and find their place within the institution.

A short course for mentees was designed to guide support staff through every stage of their mentorship journey. It offers insights into the higher education environment, clarifies the role of a mentee, and introduces a model for intentional, meaningful growth - empowering staff to navigate change with clarity, resilience, and a renewed sense of purpose. The mentee course equips mentees with the skills, insights, and support they need to thrive, grow, and navigate their journey in higher education with confidence and clarity. Effective mentorship is a skill that must be intentionally developed. This course empowers support staff mentors in higher education to confidently step into their roles, offering practical tools, shared language, and guidance. Mentors

will learn to listen actively, encourage growth, and empower mentees to lead their journeys. By strengthening mentoring skills, the course helps mentors become role models, guides, and champions for professional development and inclusion. Whether new or experienced, all mentors will gain new insights. Through transformative mentoring, support staff can help build a thriving, collaborative, supportive institutional culture where everyone can flourish.



Staff of People and Culture and Optentia

B1 Rating: Prof. Ian Rothmann

Prof. Ian Rothmann, a professor in Work and Organisational Psychology and Acting Director of the Optentia Research Unit at the North-West University (NWU) has been awarded a prestigious B1 rating by the National Research Foundation (NRF) of South Africa. He is a respected scholar in well-being and sustainable employability who focuses on developing pathways toward social justice and flourishing of people in work and non-work contexts. The B1 rating underscores his international standing as a leading researcher in work-related well-being and sustainable employability.

With a career spanning over three decades, Prof. Rothmann has mentored 148 Master's, 76 PhD students, and eight postdoctoral fellows worldwide. He has published over 259 peer-reviewed articles and book chapters. His work has substantially contributed to global knowledge on flourishing, decent work, work engagement, burnout, job demands and resources, resilience, and capabilities. Prof. Rothmann's influence extends beyond academia. He has advised government policy on employee well-being, developed culturally sensitive interventions, and contributed to global

dialogues through keynotes and editorial roles. His research vision focuses on developing human capabilities and sustainable employability through interdisciplinary, socially just approaches.

Research Journey

Between 2016 and 2023, his research consistently focused on advancing the understanding of well-being, flourishing, and sustainable employability. A significant strand of his work centred on work engagement and burnout, highlighting the importance of individual psychological conditions, supervisor relationships, trust profiles, and daily need satisfaction in fostering or hindering engagement. His contributions to resilience research provided new insights into how social, cultural, and familial resources enhance youth and employee resilience, particularly in challenging environments.

Flourishing at work formed another core theme. He validated tools like the Flourishing-at-Work Scale (FAWS) and showed how person-environment fit, leadership practices, and workplace resources are essential for promoting well-being and organisational citizenship. Additionally, his studies in sustainable employability addressed the psychosocial effects of unemployment and the development of culturally sensitive interventions to

promote re-employment and psychological health.

In recent years, his research evolved toward integrating the capability approach, highlighting how capability sets, rather than only resource availability, are critical for promoting sustainable well-being and meaningful work experiences. These studies emphasised the importance of enabling individuals to exercise agency and realise valued opportunities at work. Looking ahead, his research vision is to pioneer the development of interventions and practices that foster sustainable employability through capability development, particularly within culturally diverse and evolving work contexts. He aims to develop robust, context-specific capability measures, integrate capability-based frameworks into human resource practices, and address workplace inequality, diversity, and inclusion challenges.

Through interdisciplinary research, stakeholder collaboration, and global engagement, he aspires to drive real-world impact, supporting individuals and organisations in moving from precariousness to flourishing. His long-term goal is to contribute to building fair, inclusive, and sustainable work environments that prioritise human dignity, agency, and growth.

Why Your Employees Are Ghosting Your Well-being Programmes by Prof. Llewellyn van Zyl

Last year, I attended a "Burnout Prevention" workshop that left me wondering what I gained. Picture a tired crowd in a brightly lit room, a consultant clicking through 288 slides packed with clichés, while attendees discreetly checked emails or yawned. We left without learning anything. Why? Most well-being programs fail because they offer generic solutions to complex problems without asking employees what they truly need. Despite 92% of employees reporting a need for well-being initiatives, participation hovers around 10-20%. People quickly detect superficial efforts; employees disengage quietly but decisively if programs feel like corporate checkboxes.

Think about it: Would you value an "improving communications" session if your real issues were with your manager or colleagues? Or attend corporate-sponsored yoga when overwhelmed with work? Employees tuning out well-being programs are sending a clear message: initiatives must address real needs.

First, employees crave tailored solutions,

not generic programmes. Offering yoga when stress management tools are needed misses the mark. Second, employees quickly disengage from inauthentic efforts. When leadership genuinely prioritises well-being, participation and ROI rise. Third, addressing symptoms without fixing root causes - often systemic - only worsens problems.

To fix this, start by profoundly listening. Move beyond checkbox surveys and engage in meaningful dialogue and interviews to uncover actual needs. Senior leaders must model vulnerability and genuinely prioritise well-being, setting an example employees will follow. Avoid one-size-fits-all solutions. Tailor interventions to individuals' personalities, work styles, and goals, supporting them with manageable changes. Motivational interviewing or coaching can help.

Authentic storytelling also matters. Share real, personal experiences, not corporate fluff. Employees resonate with genuine journeys and struggles. Thoughtful incentives - like extra leave or wellness stipends—can boost engagement, but they must feel sincere and not transactional.

When done right, well-being initiatives spark powerful cultural movements within organisations. They embed healthy practices into everyday routines, significantly reducing burnout

and enhancing productivity. Research shows genuine interventions advocated by leadership create a "six degrees of separation effect," positively influencing up to six colleagues beyond one's immediate circle, ultimately transforming the health of the entire organisational ecosystem.

Conclusion

So, next time you find yourself in a brightly lit conference room staring at slide 287 of 288, remember this moment... real change happens when we listen deeply, act authentically, and prioritise genuine human needs over generic prescriptions. Employee well-being is not about ticking boxes, but meaningful connection and thoughtful action!

My PhD Journey by Dr Jeanie Cavé

This PhD journey has proven to me that it truly takes a village. I am deeply grateful for the support, wisdom, and encouragement from remarkable individuals and communities, especially the wonderful people at Optentia.

This work would not have been possible without the leaders, teachers, and the family of PhD students and supervisors, all of whom Optentia has offered connections to. Through this process, I've created a model that explains intergenerational relationships from an interactional perspective, offering a depth of understanding never seen before.

I've also developed a process that allows even novice practitioners to apply this complex model in minutes, a task that previously took experienced therapists hours to complete.

Completing my PhD has been the most profound challenge and most satisfying triumph of my life, a journey that has humbled me beyond anything. I could have expected and it filled me with immense pride I have never known before. This work reflects my passion for serving the community and advancing knowledge.

I'm grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this field, and I hope my work will be expanded, critiqued, and refined by others to ultimately serve intergenerational communities in profound ways, ultimately towards age-inclusive societies.

**"If you want to go fast,
go alone; if you want
to go far, go together"**
– African Proverb.



Dr Jeanie Cavé

My PhD Journey *by* Dr Carol-Ann Dixon

After an incredible journey over the past five years, I am proud to have completed my PhD! My thesis, *A Conceptual Framework to Promote Effective Relational Outcomes within a Residential Intergenerational Caring Context in South Africa*, introduces the Care and Relational Dynamics (CaRD) conceptual framework: an interaction-centric approach to caregiving that guides practical applications in operationalising care.

Adopting a critical realist perspective, I explored the relationships between older persons (OPs) and younger care workers (CWs), analysing how broader environments, formal care settings, and interpersonal contexts shape relational outcomes. My research highlights the complex interplay of mechanisms across different levels - individual, inter-individual, group, and generational - emphasising the significance of both OPs and CWs in enhancing care quality. This work has implications for intergenerational care, advocating for more equitable relational policies in formal residential care. The PhD journey was profound. I am deeply grateful for the support of my



Dr Carol-Ann Dixon

supervisors, Prof. Vera Roos and Dr Matthews Katjene.

I am also grateful to my PhD study buddies and support network who held me accountable and grounded me. My journey was also geographical as my PhD followed me during my travels across the UK and South Africa in our faithful camper van. Almost every chapter was written in a different town and climate! On a personal level, this journey has made me more curious and attuned to multiple perspectives. On a professional level, when working with couples, my lens has broadened with greater awareness of the importance of context and mainly a more precise focus on the mechanisms which play out in the relational space as a dynamic interactive dance between people rather than a view of two individual and separate people. Moving forward, I aim to continue

contributing to the quality of relationships in my work and social environment by promoting empathic regard in all my interactions.

A Journey of Growth: My Doctoral Experience *by* Dr Praise Choeni

My doctoral journey has been incredible, filled with challenges, discoveries, and immense growth. From late nights of research to countless revisions, each step tested my resilience and determination. Throughout this process, I gained valuable insights into gender equality, mainly through the lens of the capability approach (CA), which enhanced my ability to engage with complex gender-related issues and refine my research design.

Beyond academic achievement, this journey has been transformative. Every obstacle has helped me refine my purpose. Exploring capabilities like political and economic empowerment has reshaped my understanding of fairness and equality in the workplace, deepening my commitment to advocating for gender-equal environments. This experience has also heightened my awareness of the systemic barriers women face in professional settings.

I am deeply grateful to Prof. Ian Rothmann and the Optentia team for their unwavering support. The SLP also played a vital role in my growth, providing invaluable skills, and I highly recommend it to others seeking to enhance their academic and professional development.

This journey has been a testament to perseverance and my ongoing commitment to fostering inclusive workplaces. As I close this chapter, I eagerly embrace the next, filled with excitement for continued growth, collaboration, and the opportunity to inspire others.



Dr Praise Choeni

When Giving Up Was Not an Option: My PhD Success Story by Dr Vedhna Lalla

There is a quote that says, "Where patience is a virtue, perseverance leads to success." This has never been truer for me. Undertaking the journey of a PhD was not something I did on a whim; it has been a long and challenging path filled with pain, grief, and, ultimately, joy and success. I embarked on this journey in 2010 and was awarded an international scholarship. I was excited and enthusiastic to pursue it. My promoter and co-promoter at that time were truly my inspiration.

Tragedy struck my family when, in May 2010, my mother was diagnosed with fourth-stage stomach cancer. Soon after, I received more devastating news: my father had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. With a young family and the responsibility of caring for my parents living with me, I had to put my dream on hold. In May 2011, my mother lost her battle with cancer.

In 2017, I decided to try again and registered for an interdisciplinary PhD in Industrial-Organisational Psychology and Social Work. However, my father's health took a turn for the worse, and he passed away in January 2018. Alas, once again, I had to let go of this journey. As a newly appointed academic at NWU in 2017, I am grateful that I took that break and chose to attempt the PhD again in 2021. This would be my third attempt; psychologically, I knew this was the last attempt.

From the outset, I can say that having supportive study promoters is the most crucial part of the process. I feel fortunate to have had the best two study promoters. Prof. Chrizanne Van Eeden was integral to my journey, and I feel honoured and proud to have had her support. Both personally and academically, I would not have succeeded without her.

There are very few study promoters who can genuinely and actively display positive psychology as she does. Prof. Ian Rothmann, too, displayed understated brilliance. He quietly encouraged me and consistently offered his full support, with a remarkable aptitude for research that is undeniable.

In addition to having supportive study promoters, I believe perseverance truly matters. The ability to continue against all odds and understand that giving up is not an option is essential. People who have completed PhDs often share tips such as using the Pomodoro method or writing daily. I will add my perspective: do what works best for you. You may not be able to write every day, but on the days, you can ensure you write as much as possible. Set deadlines for yourself and remember to take care of your well-being.



Dr Vedhna Lalla

Having a supportive husband and family was tremendously helpful. Also, be prepared to lose people you thought were your friends or close ones while gaining friends from unexpected places. The future awaits! I am uncertain of what lies ahead, but I am focused on developing and expanding my research profile. As a spiritual being, I believe the universe has great plans for me.

Impact Case Study: Age-inclusive ICT Innovation for Service Delivery in South Africa by Prof. Vera Roos

Summary of the impact

“Yabelana” (referring to “sharing”) is a first-of-its-kind self-sustaining technology artefact with context-specific service delivery information, accommodating both older (push button) and smartphone technology. Three interrelated trends informed this innovative development:

- Older persons in sub-Saharan Africa are the fastest-growing population group on a very young continent (population-wise).
- Concurrently, technology is leapfrogging throughout Africa – across socio-economic groupings, across generations.
- Deficits in service delivery, affecting older persons disproportionately.

Older South Africans’ proper inclusion in technology for accessing information and services often lags for various reasons, primarily due to the underreporting and misrepresentation of their use of cell phone technology, mainly driven by ageism. This project explored ICT beyond youth and as an Intergenerational Contact Zone (ICZ). With older generations in mind as end-users, the Yabelana ICT ecosystem consists of a website, an app and a USSD code, promoting access to a service delivery repository for all generations to support well-being across the life course. The process of developing and implementing the Yabelana artefact has been published as an open-access book by Springer:

[Age-inclusive ICT innovation for service delivery in South Africa: A developing country perspective.](#)

Narrative description of the impact

Older persons quickly demonstrated agency and eagerness to use the new technology, mastered the application, and were able to access information on their cell phones. Younger participants in qualitative research expressed their realisation that older persons are eager and capable of learning new technologies. Within the North-West University, acknowledgement came in the form of the Vice-Chancellor’s Award for Innovation and Community Engagement in 2018. The external impact is demonstrated by the 36k X accesses reported on Springer’s website. Altmetric has recorded 4 X posts from 4 X users, with an upper bound of 7.649 followers according to Springer’s webpage.

In 2024, the Yabelana project was nominated as a finalist of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS)+20 Forum High-Level Event, hosted by the International Telecommunication Union and the Global Coalition on Ageing, Geneva, Switzerland. The project’s impact is further recognised through numerous conference presentations and invitations, including the 16th Global International Federation on Ageing Conference in Bangkok, Thailand (2023) and an invitation to the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation Standing Committee on Scientific and Technological Cooperation, Islamabad, Pakistan (2024).

Service: Uncovering the Heart of Academic Life by Prof. Ian Rothmann

Academic citizenship empowers us to live our values, uplift others, and turn small acts of service into powerful catalysts for change. Academic citizenship involves active participation in governance, fostering inclusive environments, mentoring colleagues and students, and upholding ethical standards in academic work. Research indicates that academic citizenship enhances individual and institutional effectiveness, promotes community belonging, and contributes to broader societal well-being.

A central concern is whether emerging academics - recent graduates, early-career researchers, and newly appointed faculty—recognise the value of academic citizenship and possess the capabilities to engage in it meaningfully. Several challenges inhibit academic citizenship: heavy workloads, lack of institutional support or incentives, difficulty in measuring impact, the overemphasis on individual achievements and rankings, and shifting personal values.

Dimensions of academic citizenship include service to the institution (through governance, transformation efforts, and mentorship), service to the discipline (promoting African scholarship and contributing to academic communities), service to students (providing mentorship and welfare support), community engagement (applying academic knowledge to societal needs), and ethical and professional conduct (promoting inclusion, fairness, and integrity). Institutional loyalty and advocacy also play a vital role in fostering a positive academic culture and driving constructive change.

A strong academic identity fosters belonging, shapes behaviour, and encourages commitment to the institution's mission. Building engagement beyond formal duties requires facilitating self-discovery, aligning personal goals with professional values, and creating safe environments for authentic expression.

Developing capabilities for academic citizenship involves three strategies: expanding capabilities so academics can align involvement with personal strengths, supporting autonomy by allowing choice in how academics contribute, and fostering reflective practice to deepen ethical engagement.



By nurturing organisational citizenship capabilities, institutions can better enable academics to act meaningfully and sustainably within their communities.

Mentorship is critical for developing academic citizenship. Formalised mentorship programs focusing on transformation and inclusivity support academic and personal growth. Regular one-on-one mentoring discussions can address values, social justice, academic progress, personal challenges, and career aspirations, while group mentoring builds peer support networks and shared learning experiences.

Several reflective questions emerge: Should it extend beyond traditional service to include interdisciplinary collaboration, policy influence, and ethical leadership? How should academic citizenship be valued and rewarded, particularly in systems dominated by research output metrics? Furthermore, how do different cultural and institutional contexts - and South Africa's socio-political history - shape understandings and practices of academic citizenship? Ultimately, academic citizenship is more than fulfilling service roles; it is a practice of integrity, ethics, and agency aligned with personal values. Academics who engage authentically in mentorship, institutional development, and community engagement become catalysts for positive change, advancing individual flourishing and societal progress.

Behavioural Risk: News from the Programme *by* Fred Goede

already in the programme bringing the total to 44, plus 4 PhD students in UARM.

In 2025, UARM's intake of first-year M. Com students increased. The photo shows lecturers for the first module co-presented by Dr Emmanuel Mulambya and Fred Goede (programme leader) with the students. Also in the photo is Eddie Lindeque (PhD student). These students are joining the 22 second-year students,



Staff and students of the Behavioural Risk Work Program



Fred Goede at Optentia Usiba 2025

African Premiere: Human Forever by Prof. Jaco Hoffman

The African premiere of Human Forever, held on December 12, 2024, at Ster-Kinekor at the V&A Waterfront, Cape Town, was an inspiring and unforgettable afternoon for everyone there. The acclaimed documentary, directed by Jonathan de Jong and featuring Teun Toebes' journey alongside people with dementia, touched the hearts of all in attendance, celebrating resilience, dignity and the boundless human spirit. We extend deep gratitude to everyone who contributed to the success of this event:

ILC South Africa (hosted by NWU, UCT, Geratec): Prof. Monica Ferreira, Prof. Jaco Hoffman, Prof. Sebastiana Kalula, and Dr Rayne Stroebel, whose steadfast support and leadership brought this remarkable film to African audiences. GERATEC Staff: Whose dedication and commitment to creating an inclusive and compassionate experience embodied the values showcased in Human Forever.

The courage of Teun Toebes inspires change in how dementia is perceived and understood worldwide. Jonathan de Jong's creative vision brought the powerful story to life on screen.

Ms Civil Legodu, Chief Director at the National Department of Social Development, responsible for older persons, graced the event with her presence and lent her expertise to this cause. Gregor Sneddon, Secretary General of the International Federation on Ageing, provided an inspiring global perspective and advocacy for dignified ageing.

The honorary guests from the Hangberg Community enriched the screening and reminded us of the importance of unity and shared humanity. Special thanks go to our audience for filling the theatre with energy and warmth. As Human Forever continues to inspire audiences worldwide, we are proud to have shared this pivotal moment with you. Together, we are championing a future where we celebrate and honour every person's humanity.

Link: <https://human-forever.com/>



Teun Toebes (Author), Rayne Stroebel (ILC SA), Civil Legodu (Chief Director, National Department of Social Development); Naomi Malobe (National Department of Social Development), Gregor Sneddon (IFA Secretary General); Jaco Hoffman (Optentia, NWU/ILC SA)

Optentia House by Lynn Booyesen

When Building 22 became Optentia House in 2017, we were aware of the asbestos roof and knew it would eventually need to be replaced. However, we never imagined reaching that point would take almost eight years!

In November 2024, we received the much-anticipated news that the replacement would take place in early 2025, with a timeline that set the 'site handover' date for February 5, 2025. With this exciting milestone ahead of us, we eagerly began planning and packing during the first two weeks back at work in January 2025.

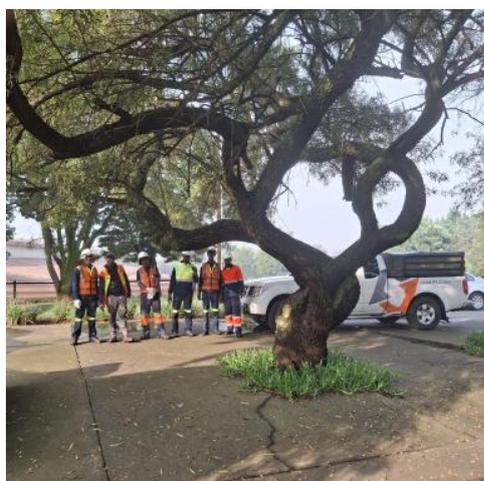
Thanks to the dedication of so many, the curtains were removed, and our colleagues from the Archive carefully wrapped and moved all the art pieces we had on loan. With the invaluable support of colleagues from various departments, Optentia staff, and family members, we spent ten hectic days sorting, wrapping, and packing. Along the way, we lost three pairs of scissors (at least 50 times), a little bit of our sanity, and our tempers at times - but we also rediscovered forgotten treasures and realised how much more effective (and perhaps different) we are!

We recycled three cubic bags of paper, used 2.5 rolls of bubble wrap, one roll of box paper, more than 95 boxes, and

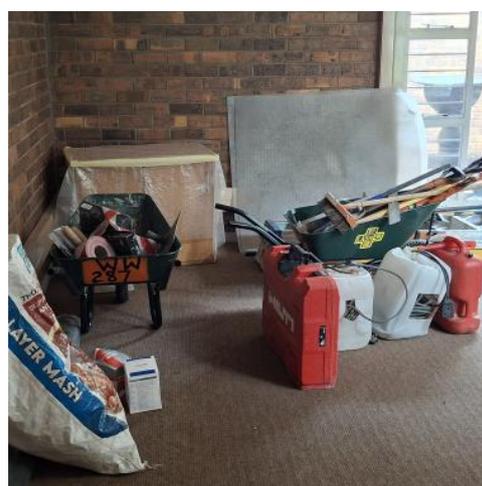
25+ rolls of packing tape. In the end, an entire office-house was packed up!

After almost two months of frustrated anticipation, we are grateful that progress is finally being made, and the deconstruction has begun. We feel blessed to have the Indaba and A13 offices as a temporary sanctuary, and the latest update predicts that we will be able to move back in by the end of June. Then, we do it all over again - unpacking and settling back into Optentia House!

We are grateful for the updated safety of a 'healthier' roof and are counting down the days until we can return to our beloved Optentia House!



Contractors arriving at Optentia House to start with the removal of the old roof.



Contractors starting their work at Optentia House

New Optentia PhD Student: D.B. (Danie) le Roux:

With over 25 years in the hospitality industry—eight of those aboard luxury cruise liners - I've had a front-row seat to how people live, travel, and connect. My academic foundation includes qualifications in Hospitality Management, a Postgraduate Diploma, and an MBA. I thought I had my career path figured out. Then I made a shift that changed everything.

A few years ago, I accepted a position at Methodist Homes for the Aged, a move that many found surprising. "How do you go from cruise ships to retirement villages?" people often ask. My answer is simple: fulfilment. In the retirement sector, I discovered the deep value of supporting people at a vulnerable stage of life - helping, assisting, or simply being present for those who might not be able to care for themselves. It's work that carries purpose.

As a PhD candidate at North-West University, I'm channelling that purpose into research. My focus is on how legislative adjustments can improve affordability in non-profit elderly care facilities in South Africa. With a growing ageing population and rising costs, the sustainability of elderly care is at risk. Many non-profit organisations want to offer quality services but are limited by rigid regulatory frameworks and financial constraints.

Using a Critical Realist lens, my research explores the deeper systemic and policy-level barriers to affordability, beyond surface-level analysis. This approach helps uncover how legislation, economic factors, and institutional structures interact in ways that can either support or stifle effective care.

Leading one of the larger non-profit elderly care organisations in the country has given me firsthand insight into these challenges. My goal is to produce research that doesn't sit on a shelf, but informs real change—helping decision-makers and stakeholders rethink

how we fund and regulate care for older adults.

This PhD is not just an academic milestone; it's the next step in a journey driven by service, experience, and a belief that how we care for our elders says everything about the kind of society we are.



Danie le Roux

Recommended Books

- Amabile, T., & Kramer, S. *The progress principle: Using small wins to ignite joy, engagement, and creativity at work*. Boston: Harvard Business Review Press.
- Bernstein, E., Horn, M.B., & Moesta, B. (2024). *Job moves: Nine steps for making progress in your career*. London: Heligo Books.
- Booth, W. (2024). *The craft of research* (5th ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Field, A., Wagenmakers, E., & Van Doorn, J. (2025). *Discovering statistics using JASP*. London: Sage.
- Friese, S. (2019). *Qualitative data analysis with ATLAS TI* (3rd ed.). Los Angeles: Sage.
- Martela, F. (2025). *Stop chasing happiness: A pessimist's guide to a good life*. London: Allen & Unwin.
- Sachs, J.D., Sorondo, M.S., Flanagan, O. & Vendley, W. (2022). *Ethics in action for sustainable development*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Saldana, J. *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (4th ed.). London: Sage.
- Schwantes, M. (2025). *Humane leadership: Lead with radical love, be a kick-ass boss*. New York: Business Expert Press



Prof. Ian Rothmann and Optentia's excellent support team: Soraya Harding, Lynn Booyesen, Marinda Malan, SF van der Westhuizen and Ivan Pelser