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Shaping Scholars, Shaping Leaders

At the North-West University, and especially within Optentia, we know that leadership is not a luxury. South African universities face the dual challenge of producing world-class research while also preparing graduates to strengthen communities marked by poverty, inequality, unemployment and change.

[Heemstra](#) suggests that leadership development begins with self-leadership: managing one’s time, goals, and emotional responses. From there, academics can turn outward – building an inclusive culture, setting clear expectations, and modelling resilience in the face of failure. Finally, she emphasises that good academic leadership means preparing others to lead. Graduate students and postdocs should not just leave with scientific skills, but also with the confidence and tools to manage teams of their own.

For Optentia, this is central to our mission: shaping knowledge while shaping people who can build the capabilities our society needs to flourish. True academic leadership is rooted in values of growth, dignity, and resilience. The challenge before us is clear: How can we prepare not only skilled scholars, but also leaders who give others the confidence to imagine and create a better future?



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 65.16 peer-reviewed articles, book chapters, and conference papers.



The Optentia Scorecard

	2022	2023	2024	2025
Peer-reviewed article equivalents	98.09	67.40	81.91	65.16
Papers: Conferences	9	27	10	7
Participating master's students	34	63	77	76
Completed master's students	23	5	18	16
Participating PhD students	52	50	39	47
Completed PhD students	6	10	10	5
Number of workshops presented	10	19	11	2
Number of workshop participants	250	619	550	121
Number of mentors trained	-	-	59	21
Number of mentees trained	-	-	49	30

Optentia Pulse: Spotlights and Breaking News

- Participate in the IFA's 17th Global Conference on Ageing co-presented by the NWU. Access the website [here](#).
- Optentia just released a new video with the title: "Research on Ageing at Optentia". Click [here](#) to watch the video.
- Book launch on 25 September 2025 (15:00-17:00): "Global perspectives on job insecurity in higher education: Precarity in the ivory tower", edited by Roll, De Witte and Rothmann. You can attend in person or on [YouTube](#).
- Book launch: 2 October 2025 (10:00-14:00): Community Psychology: Global crises, local realities, and action by Duncan, Roos, & Pillay. You can attend in person or on YouTube.
- Optentia has developed two new short courses for professional and support staff in higher education institutions who plan to mentor or be mentored. Visit our [Glide page](#) for more information about our mentor and mentee short courses.
- Read about Optentia's research and products [here](#).

Events@Optentia

Optentia will be hosting, co-hosting or contributing to various research events from September to November 2025.

International Federation of Ageing (9-12 September 2025) – Cape Town. Visit our exhibition at the conference.

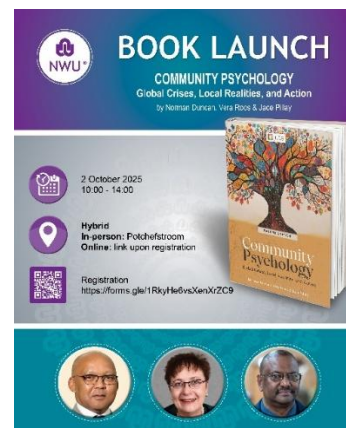


The Faculty of Humanities, North-West University will host a Spring School from 17-19 September 2025. Prof. Ian Rothmann will present two workshops: a) Analysing data using Mplus. b) Writing peer-reviewed articles. Click [here](#) for more information.

The launch of the book "Global Perspectives on Job Insecurity in Higher Education: Precarity in the Ivory Tower" will take place on 25 September 2025. See the brochure below.



The launch of the book "Community Psychology: Global crises, local realities, and action" will take place on 2 October 2025 (10:00-14:00). See the brochure below.



On 25-26 November 2025, Optentia will host a workshop "Teaching with Research". This two-day workshop brings together lecturers from universities to examine how research is taught—and how teaching practice in this area can be strengthened. While grounded in the content of research, the focus is on pedagogy: how to design learning experiences that help students engage critically and practically with research. Hosted at the Dinokeng Game Reserve, the event offers space to share teaching approaches, test new ideas, and connect with colleagues working toward better methods of education. The workshop will produce practical outputs, including teaching resources and ideas for integrating new approaches into curricula, which can be shared across institutions. By centring pedagogy in the teaching of research, the event aims to improve student learning outcomes and, ultimately, the quality of research emerging from South African higher education.

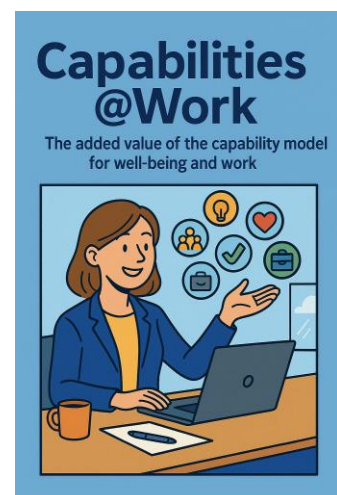
Capabilities@Work: The Added Value of the Capability Model for Well-being and Work *by Prof. Ian Rothmann*

We are pleased to announce the publication of *Capabilities@Work: The Added Value of the Capability Model for Well-Being and Work* in 2026. The book, to be published by Cambridge University Press, is edited by Prof. Jac van der Klink and Prof. Sebastiaan Rothmann. This book explores how the capability approach – developed initially in philosophy and economics – can enrich our understanding of well-being in the context of work. By focusing on what people are actually able to do and to be, the capability model offers a powerful lens for analysing work, organisations, and policies. The chapters and authors are as follows:

- Chapter 1: The capability approach for work: An introduction (Jac van der Klink and Sebastiaan Rothmann)
- Chapter 2: Capabilities and work: new developments (Jac van der Klink, Ute Bültmann, Sandra Brouwer, Alex Burdorf, Wilmar Schaufeli, Gert Jan van der Wilt, Femke Abma)
- Chapter 3: The capability approach from a contributive justice perspective (Jac van der Klink)
- Chapter 4: The paradox of capability assessment (Gert Jan van der Wilt)
- Chapter 5: The integrative aspects of the capability approach (Sridhar Venkatapuram)
- Chapter 6: Integrating the capability approach with other models in social justice and work theories (Leoni van der Vaart, Roland Blonk, Wilmar Schaufeli, and Patricia Saleeby)
- Chapter 7: Introducing justice into the governance of corporations (Hans van Ees and Jac van der Klink)
- Chapter 8: The application of the capability approach in human resource management (Amber Kersten, Hanneke van

Heijster, Irmgard Borghouts, Marc van Veldhoven and Jac van der Klink)

- Chapter 9: The capability approach applied to working individuals: Decent and flourishing work (Sebastiaan Rothmann, Suzette Ragadu, Annelisa Murangi, and Neil Barnard)
- Chapter 10: Practical examples of applying the capability approach at different levels in the organisation (Margot Joosen, Patricia van Casteren, Jan Meerman, Henry Lewis, Gaston Dollevoet, Benedikte Schaapveld, Kim Janssens, Jac van der Klink)
- Chapter 11: Cross-cultural perspectives on the capability approach (Jasper van Assche)
- Chapter 12: The capability approach and the decolonial 'parrhesia': Theorising from the Global South (Blessed Ngwenya, Jac van der Klink)
- Chapter 13: Work capabilities in different occupations and countries (Sebastiaan Rothmann, Neil Barnard, Mirna Nel, Bianca Arendse, Annelisa Murangi, Suzette Ragadu, and Tessa de Wet)
- Chapter 14: The capability approach: A guiding framework for work capabilities and leadership (Thapelo Chachaa, Sebastiaan Rothmann, and Marius Stander)
- Chapter 15: Future work and the capability approach: Digitalisation, globalisation and climate change (Jac van der Klink and Sebastiaan Rothmann)



The Continued Journey of Developing Support Staff Members *by* Kele Ramagaga

Mentorship programmes for professional and support staff members are an important step in aligning with the university's strategic plan. It aims to strengthen support staff development and assist staff in navigating institutional change effectively, particularly as the university undergoes a restructuring process. The programme also promotes inclusive and ethical workplace practices, reinforcing a sense of belonging and contributing to a more productive work environment.

When the mentorship programme was first implemented in 2024, we received several applications from support staff members. Unfortunately, these had to be declined as the original programme was designed specifically for academic staff. We are therefore pleased to announce that the mentorship33 programme has now been expanded to include both support and academic staff members, ensuring broader participation and inclusivity.

As a team, we are proud to share that the first phase of this process has been completed. The programme has been carefully adapted and contextualised to meet the needs of support staff. We are now preparing to launch the programme, after which we will proceed with its full implementation in the coming weeks.

For more information, please look out for the launch details on the [Optentia website](#), and click [here](#) for further information.



Prof. Ian Rothmann
Director, Optentia



Dr. Neil Barnard
Senior Lecturer, School of Industrial Psychology and
Human Resource Management



Ms. Anjinet Jordaan
Project Manager, Optentia



Dr. Lance Bunt
Senior Lecturer, School of Computer Science and
Information Systems
Instructional designer for this course



Ms. Kele Ramagaga
Mentorship & Mentee SLP Coordinator, Optentia



Ms. Lynn Booyen
Office Administrator, Optentia

The Short Course Development team



Honouring Growth: Third Mentorship and Mentee Short Course Awards Ceremony *by Kele Ramagaga*

We are delighted to share another milestone in the Mentorship and Mentee Short Learning Programme. The programme continues to grow in both reach and impact, offering a structured yet flexible approach to professional development and relationship building. We recently concluded Cohort 4 of 2024 and Cohort 1 of 2025, with a large group of mentors and mentees completing the programme. This marked our third certificate ceremony, bringing together colleagues from all three campuses to create a valuable space for connection, collaboration, and celebration.

Our keynote speaker, Prof. Lebo Matemane-Gafane, reminded us that: "*Mentorship is the bridge between potential and achievement.*" She illustrated this theme with her own story, recalling how her academic journey was shaped by a simple act of mentorship with someone's daily commitment to take her to campus during her undergraduate years. That ordinary gesture became the foundation of her success. Her story served as a powerful reminder that mentorship does not always require formal structures or large-scale commitments. However, it is the small and consistent actions that create the greatest impact.

We were also honoured to be joined by the Deputy Dean of Community Engagement from the Faculty of Humanities, who also highlighted the importance of mentorship as a catalyst for personal growth, professional development, and building a stronger sense of community across the university. The presence of management leadership underscored the institutional support for mentorship as a vital part of academic and staff development.

Moreover, to our trained mentors and mentees, congratulations on reaching this milestone. Your dedication to growth and collaboration is a true testament to your achievements and a valuable contribution to the university community. Each certificate reflects resilience and commitment, representing mentors who guide futures and mentees who embrace opportunity. Together, you embody the spirit of mentorship of building bridges between potential and achievement.



Dr Neil Barnard, Ms Kele Ramagaga, Prof. Lebo Matemane-Gafane, Prof. Ian Rothmann and Prof. Herculene Kotzé



Mentor and Mentee Awards

The mentor and mentee short courses aim to build capacity within NWU by equipping academics with the tools to create productive, supportive, and enriching mentorship relationships. The mentor course focuses on academics with doctoral qualifications, enhancing their ability to guide early-career colleagues. The mentee course prepares emerging scholars to maximise their growth, clarify their career goals, and engage in meaningful developmental conversations.

Key Data on Mentorship Participation *by Kele Ramagaga*

Another positive development is the steady growth in the number of trained mentors and mentees. As the number of mentees increases, so too does the number of mentors, reflecting both the expanding reach and the strengthening impact of the mentorship programme. This growth also demonstrates progress in achieving a key phase of the programme which is building sustainable mentorship relationships. Through the pairing relationship phase, we have been working with Dr. Lance, who has done an exceptional work in developing a mentorship database that grants access only to trained mentees. This strategy not only ensures that pairings are effective but also provides a reliable way to keep track of the information and the number of trained mentors. Between 2024 and 2025, a total of 152 participants were trained (77 mentees and 75 mentors), and we remain committed to training even more academics in the future. Each number represents more than a statistic, it reflects a colleague whose journey is contributing to a stronger, more supportive culture across our campuses. Together, mentors and mentees are building bridges between potential and achievement, creating a university community that thrives on collaboration, inclusivity, and growth. We remain committed to continuing this momentum by training more mentors and mentees and ensuring the programme continues to provide meaningful development opportunities.

Four academic mentors were honoured for their exceptional performance in the short course:

- Dr Susanne Jacobs, Centre for Child, Youth and Family Studies, Social Work, Faculty of Health Sciences.
- Prof. Thys Human, School of Languages, Faculty of Humanities.
- Prof. Ronald Lotriet, NWU Business School.
- Prof. Chris van Rhyen, School of Music, Faculty of Humanities.

These mentors excelled in fostering trust, navigating complex academic environments, managing change, and conducting impactful mentorship conversations.

The top mentees completing the Being a Successful Academic Mentee course were:

- Mr Tumelo Ramaoka, School of Mathematics, Science and Technology Education, Faculty of Education.
- Ms Germinah Motshegwa, School of Social Sciences, Faculty of Humanities.
- Mr Emile Hoffman, School of Geo- and Spatial Sciences, Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences.
- Mr Gerhardus ("Hardus") Ludick, School of Languages, Faculty of Humanities.

These mentees demonstrated outstanding insight, critical thinking, and preparedness for navigating the demands of academia through structured mentorship.



The top mentors and mentees
(third and fourth training cohorts)

An Emic Perspective on Ageing and Generational Dynamics in Africa (AGenDA): Research, Policy, and Practice

Framed within a capability approach across the life course, the AGenDA programme at the Optentia Research Unit contributes meaningfully to three key domains: research, policy, and practice. In each of these, AGenDA draws strength from a distinguished group of exceptional researchers whose expertise and contributions extend across Africa and beyond. Their collective work adds academic depth, influences policy, and introduces innovative approaches to some of the most pressing challenges facing older people and intergenerational relationships. This emic perspective closes with words of appreciation.

From Precarity to Capability in Ageing

Early research by the AGenDA programme contextualised ageing against the vulnerabilities older persons face—such as poverty, unemployment, and limited access to healthcare—which constrain freedoms and thereby limit agency. As the programme's focus shifted from precarity to capability, the emphasis moved toward promoting the notion that older persons, particularly women, are active contributors to their households, communities, and society at large. From a social justice perspective, older individuals have the right to be treated with dignity, to participate in decisions that affect their lives, and to make choices that enable them to live lives they value. Prof. Andries Baart, an extraordinary appointed researcher, brings philosophical depth through his keynote addresses at Optentia, where he explores precarity, precariousness, and social redundancy, providing conceptual clarity for addressing vulnerability in ageing and intergenerational contexts. His internationally recognised

presence theory and scholarship on care ethics have also informed the research programme on formal and community-based care.



Prof. Andries Baart

Innovations at the Nexus of Formal and Community-Based Care

Since its inception, AGenDA has engaged critically with discourses on ageing and care. Its research has prioritised relationships, cultural relevance, and inclusivity, resulting in both theoretical insights and practical contributions. A particularly influential publication, *Relational Caring: A Soft Voice in Transforming Society* by Prof. Andries Baart—co-produced through partnerships in Europe and South Africa—distils more than three decades of practice-based research on the concept of presence. This work continues to inform much of AGenDA's research on long-term care (LTC).

Complementing this, pioneering research on the development of a LTC economy in Gauteng, South Africa, by Prof. Jaco Hoffman and doctoral researcher Lowna Gie demonstrates that investment in care infrastructure is not merely a social cost but also an economic opportunity.

Journal Article – Development of a long-term care economy in Gauteng, South Africa: towards decent work. Authors Lowna Gie and Jaco Hoffman
Published on 26th March 2022 | 10 Reads



An Emic Perspective on Ageing and Generational Dynamics in Africa (AGenDA): Research, Policy, and Practice

The Long-Term Care Economy Strategy, developed in partnership with the Gauteng Provincial Government, reflects this insight by positioning care as a sector that not only provides essential services to older citizens but also creates employment opportunities—particularly for unemployed youth.

Completed doctoral studies have reinforced innovations in both formal and community-based care. Dr. Andrew Banda's research focuses on understanding how rural communities in Zambia support or limit the well-being of older people. His work highlights the complexity of rural ageing, demonstrating how individual factors (education, health, income) interact with community-level factors (infrastructure, social networks, cultural practices) to influence the quality of life for older people, particularly during crises such as COVID-19. Ultimately, the study calls for context-specific policies and interventions that ensure dignity, autonomy, and access to resources for older adults in rural Africa..



Dr Andrew Banda

Dr. Carol-Ann Dixon's PhD developed the Care and Relational Dynamics (CARD) framework in response to the persistent limitations of medicalised models of LCT. By placing authentic relationships between care workers and older persons at the centre of practice, the framework not only

complements relational care but also offers practical guidance for application within residential care ecologies.



Dr Carol-Ann Dixon

A new cohort of doctoral researchers continues to examine the complexities surrounding the care of older South Africans. Doctoral researcher Danie le Roux is critically examining the governance architecture of long-term care (LTC) in South Africa, focusing on how international commitments and constitutional obligations are translated into national policy, provincial implementation, and local service delivery. His study interrogates the structural and institutional barriers that hinder the realisation of rights-based care for older persons, including systemic challenges such as limited fiscal resources, workforce shortages, and fragmented regulatory oversight. It also evaluates the extent to which current LTC models align with the principles of equity, sustainability, and ageing in place.

By contrast, doctoral researcher Marietjie Ackermann is taking an autoethnographic approach, drawing on her own journey alongside ageing parents within a relational care ecology in the South African context. Her research critically reflects on the need for intentional planning and care actions related to ageing. The aim is to use these insights to raise awareness of older persons' needs in relation to ageing in the right place—a concept that recognises the transitions many individuals face when moving from ageing in place to formal, full-time care.

An Emic Perspective on Ageing and Generational Dynamics in Africa (AGenDA): Research, Policy, and Practice

In another area of care research, Dr. Johan Liebenberg and Prof. Vera Roos draw attention to the profound effects of unresolved trauma on older persons' well-being. Trauma arises from overwhelming shocks that disrupt the brain, immobilise the mind, and paralyse the body. By addressing the mind-body connection, mental health facilitators can support older individuals in developing new neurological pathways and regaining a sense of safety, ultimately enhancing their overall well-being.



Dr Johan Liebenberg

In addition, drawing on literature that links relational well-being to the quality of dialogue—whether effective or ineffective—Dr. Carol-Ann Dixon and Prof. Vera Roos show how effective dialogue can foster trust, intimacy, and mutual respect, thereby strengthening both relational well-being and overall well-being.

Extraordinary Professor Anne Margriet Pot combines her role at Optentia with global leadership in mental health and ageing. As President-Elect of the International Psychogeriatric Association (IPA), she is advancing international collaboration in the field of psychogeriatrics. Her inaugural lecture at Erasmus University underscored the significance of the WHO Healthy Ageing framework and emphasised the need for reflexive regulation to ensure person-centred

long-term care. Her work connects science, practice, and regulation, with particular attention to safeguarding dignity within long-term care systems.



Prof. Anne Margriet Pot

Research Innovations: The Mmogo-method

The Mmogo-method®, developed and refined under the leadership of Prof. Vera Roos, has become a hallmark of Optentia's participatory research on ageing, providing a way to capture marginalised voices and explore hard-to-discover topics.



Illustrative visual representation using the Mmogo-method

An Emic Perspective on Ageing and Generational Dynamics in Africa (AGenDA): Research, Policy, and Practice

Historically, research on older people often excluded their voices. The Mmogo-method emerged as a corrective, grounded in the indigenous principle of togetherness and collective creation. Over time, it has enabled older adults to participate as co-constructors of knowledge, generating visual and narrative data that capture cultural nuances and relational contexts. Its application in studies of intergenerational relationships has revealed the complexities of caregiving arrangements, family support structures, and community cohesion in Southern Africa. The method has been applied in multiple projects to explore the experiences of both older and younger people, particularly in contexts shaped by marginalisation and precarity. Over the years, progress has also included training new generations of researchers to use the Mmogo-method. Its reach has now extended internationally, where it is recognised as a valuable contribution to participatory and visual methodologies.

Policy Initiatives

The AGenDA programme, under the leadership of Prof. Jaco Hoffman and two extraordinary researchers, played an instrumental role in drafting the African Union Policy Framework and Plan of Action on Ageing.

As Director of the Perivoli Africa Research Centre at the University of Bristol and Extraordinary Professor at Optentia, Prof. Isabella Aboderin has been central to advancing ageing policy across the continent. She collaborated in Namibia on the development of the country's policy on the rights and protection of older persons, and her leadership has extended to establishing the formal structure of IAGG

Africa, creating a platform for sustained collaboration in ageing research.



Prof. Isabella Aboderin

Prof. Johnny Strijdom has played a significant role in policy development across Africa. Working alongside Profs. Isabella Aboderin and Jaco Hoffman, he contributed to the development of Namibia's policy on older persons, ensuring alignment with the African Union's broader framework. Beyond ageing, he was also involved in shaping the AU's Ten-Year Strategy for the Social and Solidarity Economy, linking ageing concerns to wider development agendas and social protection. His contributions underscore the integration of ageing into social policy at both national and continental levels, reinforcing its importance as a cross-cutting issue in African development.



Prof. Johnny Strijdom

An Emic Perspective on Ageing and Generational Dynamics in Africa (AGenDA): Research, Policy, and Practice

Responding to outdated, rigid, and retrospective policy frameworks, doctoral researcher Francois Riekert has embarked on a study aimed at informing policy on predicting age-related vulnerabilities and enablers across the life course for agile retirement funding.

The research of Dr. Jeanie Cavé also has the potential to inform policy. In a critical analysis of the World Health Organization's Intergenerational Toolkit (WHO Toolkit), she examined its capacity to promote intergenerational solidarity. Using a multi-phased approach, her research demonstrated that incorporating an interactional approach alongside contact theory in activity selection, adopting a relational focus during implementation, and employing observable evaluation indicators could significantly enhance the effectiveness of the WHO Toolkit. Such refinements would help foster intergenerational closeness, consensus, and cohesion across diverse country contexts.



Dr Jeanie Cavé

Practical interventions / technological advancements towards intergenerational solidarity and cohesion

AGenDA focuses on understanding and strengthening relationships between generations in diverse African contexts. At its core, the programme recognises that the ideal of age-inclusivity is grounded in

intergenerational solidarity. Yet rising intergenerational divides have been identified in South Africa and across the continent. Subtle but persistent tensions undermine cohesion and limit the care available to older population groups. These divides are often tied to broader social challenges, including poverty, inequality, gender-based violence, and shifting family dynamics in the wake of HIV/AIDS. Together, these issues highlight the urgent need for context-specific interventions to promote intergenerational understanding and solidarity.

The growing potential of technology to bridge generational divides is illustrated by the IGNITE project (Inter-Generational Networks through Information Technology), which explored how older people use mobile phones to strengthen ties with younger, whether related or unrelated. Under the leadership of Prof. Vera Roos, and in collaboration with Profs. Doris Bohman and Jaco Hoffman, along with Vera and her postgraduate students, conducted the IGNITE study and provided the first systematic evidence of older South Africans' mobile phone use and their reliance on younger people for support.



A student obtains data from an older woman about her cell phone use on a mobile device

This study revealed both the eagerness and capacity of older adults to engage with technology when given the proper relational and contextual support.

An Emic Perspective on Ageing and Generational Dynamics in Africa (AGenDA): Research, Policy, and Practice

Building on the IGNiTe project, the we-DELIVER project expanded the research to include multiple communities, gathering large-scale data on older persons' mobile phone use and their service delivery needs.



Prof. Doris Bohman



On the Vanderbijlpark campus, Vera and undergraduate students trained as field-workers to collect data from older persons at the Sharpeville Centre for the Aged

This broader evidence base informed the development of Yabelana ("to share"), a first-of-its-kind age-inclusive information

and communications technology ecosystem consisting of a website, an app, and a USSD code, specifically designed to accommodate both smartphone and push-button users giving older end-users direct access to essential local services. The we-DELIVER community-based project also served as an intergenerational contact zone where younger and older people collaborate in learning and the use of technology. The impact of Yabelana has been recognised through awards, global conference invitations, and policy engagement, including being a 2024 finalist at the World Summit on the Information Society Forum in Geneva.

The emphasis on intergenerational connectedness to foster dignity and inclusion resonates strongly with the work of international collaborators, such as Prof. Norah Keating. Norah is based at the University of Alberta, Canada, and is an internationally respected scholar on loneliness, family, and ageing. Together with Vera, she has co-authored several publications and conference presentations. Her work highlights the importance of intergenerational solidarity in supporting rural families, where older adults often provide vital care and economic assistance.



At the Ikageng Day Care Centre: Profs. Jaco Hoffman, Norah Keating, and Vera Roos with the late Ms. Malebone Susan Luthuli

An Emic Perspective on Ageing and Generational Dynamics in Africa (AGenDA): Research, Policy, and Practice

Beyond Norah's scholarly contributions, she is deeply committed to mentoring emerging scholars and fostering collegial relationships.



Prof. Norah Keating in conversation with doctoral researcher Frans du Toit

We also acknowledge the contributions of our extraordinary researchers who generously share their time and expertise as co-supervisors of our doctoral researchers. We warmly thank Prof. Ansie Kitching, Dr. Matthews Katjene, and Prof. Norman Duncan for their invaluable involvement with the doctoral researchers. Their thoughtful guidance and constructive feedback continue to enrich the programme and profoundly support the growth of the scholars it serves.



Prof. Ansie Kitching, co-promoter of Susan O'Reilly

Words of Appreciation

Celebrating the contributions of AGenDA would be incomplete without honouring those who championed the rights of older (South) Africans through global partnerships before us. We salute the foresight and advocacy of the renowned gerontologist and pioneer Nana Araba Apt, and Prof. Monica Ferreira. We acknowledge their relentless drive to place ageing in Africa firmly on national, regional, and international agendas.



Prof. Monica Ferreira



Dr Matthews Katjene with Dr Constant van Graan and Prof. Vera Roos

An Emic Perspective on Ageing and Generational Dynamics in Africa (AGenDA): Research, Policy, and Practice

Prof. Norman Duncan, co-supervisor (with Profs. Jaco Hoffman and Vera Roos) of Linda Dennis, doctoral researcher on loneliness and isolation in the third and fourth ages.



Prof. Norman Duncan, co-supervisor (with Profs. Jaco Hoffman and Vera Roos) of Linda Dennis, doctoral researcher on loneliness and isolation in the third and fourth ages

In a research programme with many second- and even third-language speakers, Ms Karen Bannister has supported emerging scholars in preparing their research for publication in high-impact scholarly journals. She not only offers her lifelong editing skills but also brings valuable insight from her familiarity with the South African vernacular and her ability to position ideas effectively for international audiences.

The AGenDA programme was conceptualised and brought to life by Prof. Jaco Hoffman, whose wide-ranging academic expertise and relational insight have profoundly enriched its development. Jaco moves with equal ease in the most distinguished circles and in rural settings, where he readily immerses himself in hands-on fieldwork. Known for his openness to new ideas and

perspectives, he is a steadfast advocate for ensuring that African perspectives on ageing are recognised and valued in their rightful place within the global discourse.



Prof. Jaco Hoffman: Championing African perspectives in global conversations

Read a recent peer-reviewed article co-authored by Prof. Jaco Hoffman:

Venter, A., Petersen, C., & Hoffman, J. (2025). Older black South African women's perceptions and attitudes of long-term care: An Ubuntu-centric cultural perspective. *Culture & Psychology*, 31(2), 659-676. [doi](#)

Click [here](#) to watch the video "Ageing Research at Optentia".

Reflections on the Research and Innovation Week *by Prof. Ian Rothmann*

The first two days of Research and Innovation Week reminded me why these spaces matter so much. What struck me most were the voices of our master's and PhD students. Their concerns and hopes were clear:

- Employability: the need to build capabilities that prepare them not just for research, but for meaningful work in a changing world.
- Research competence in the age of technology and AI: the ability to navigate complexity with confidence.
- Connection to supervisors and research support staff: partnerships that give them both freedom and guidance to grow.

- Mentorship: relationships that extend beyond technical skills to the deeper journey of becoming.

What I heard, above all, was a need and hope for sustainable employability. Through the lens of the capability approach, this is about more than skills. It is about developing valued beings and doings and creating conditions where students can expand their opportunities (and resources), and achieve what they have reason to value.

Here's the thing: if we, as staff, supervisors, mentors, and colleagues, can champion capability development, we do more than prepare students for the job market. We enable them to thrive, to contribute, and to shape futures that matter—to themselves and to society. Let's be champions for capability development—because that's how we make research and innovation truly meaningful.



Lynn Booysen, Anjonet Jordaan and students at the NWU Mahikeng Campus

Experiences at the Research and Innovation Week by Lynn Booysen

We had the privilege to attend the 2nd R&I week for 2025, this time in Mahikeng. The Mmabatho Convention Centre was our first stop to set up an Optentia exhibition stand (for Monday, 18 Aug) with several other NWU entities. Then, moving to set up in the Great Hall on Tuesday.

I was surprised at the constant stream of Mahikeng Campus staff and enthusiastic students who stopped by for information and even just a chat. We were even more surprised by their body language when they realised that there is so much more support available than they knew about!

It was also worrying to hear sad stories from students who have been registered for two years, and have made little progress with their studies.

It was also good to meet colleagues from Research Support at the North-West University face-to-face. They stepped right up with advice and support for the students.

The Research and Innovation week turned out to be a significant event for Optentia, not only in the sense that additional students were recruited for the Short Learning Programme in Research Design, but also because we could provide institutional knowledge and support from our years of experience and build new connections.



Colleagues from the NWU Research Office: Zama Kose, Heide Goedhals, Johann du Plessis, Amanda Koto, Mpe Meintjes, Teresa Smit

News in Brief

Various Optentia PhD students were awarded PhDs in May 2025: Dr Vedhna Lalla (PhD – Social Work), Dr Praise Choeni (PhD – Industrial Psychology), Dr Carol-Ann Dixon (PhD – Social Sciences) and Dr Jeanie Cavé (PhD – Social Sciences).



Dr Vedhna Lalla and Dr Praise Choeni



Dr Jeanie Cavé with her promoters:
Prof. Vera Roos and Prof. Matthews
Katjene

Optentia recently held a function to bid farewell to two of its programme leaders, Prof. Japie Greeff and Prof. Hermien Zaaïman. We extend our gratitude for their leadership and contributions. Prof. Greeff will remain part of Optentia as an extraordinary professor, ensuring his expertise continues to enrich the work of the entity.



Optentia staff participated in several scientific events between May and September 2025. We thank Lynn Booysen and Anjonet Jordaan for their excellent presentations and exhibitions of Optentia's work at these events.



Prof. Ian Rothmann, Anjonet Jordaan and
Lynn Booysen at the Mahikeng Campus

News in Brief

Prof. Bryan Dik, Extraordinary Professor in Optentia, was recently awarded a grant of USD 2.1 million from the Council for Independent Colleges and the Lilly Endowment Inc. (USA). The four-year study will investigate how universities that are members of NetVUE (Network for Vocation in Undergraduate Education) foster a sense of calling and vocation among students, faculty, and staff. For more information about NetVUE, please visit this [link](#).



Prof. Bryan Dik

Prof. Darelle van Greunen, an extraordinary professor in Optentia won South Africa's 'Science Oscar' for digital innovation in Africa. Click [here](#) to read more.



Prof. Darelle van Greunen

Prof. Ian Rothmann, Dr Neil Barnard, and Dr Elette Horn participated in a workshop on Education for Employability, organised by the Directorate of Career Development of the Department of Higher Education and Training.

The Optentia Scientific Committee recently approved cutting-edge PhD project proposals. Consider the following valuable studies:

- Saskia Fehr: The conceptualization, assessment and development of spiritual awakening (Prof. Llewellyn van Zyl and Prof. Ian Rothmann).
- Lena-Mari Josling: Fostering entrepreneurial readiness among South African adolescents through digital platforms (Prof. Ian Rothmann, Dr Neil Barnard).
- Geraldine Meyers Mashamba: On-demand services in the gig economy as a pathway to sustainable livelihoods in South Africa (Prof. Ian Rothmann, Dr Neil Barnard).
- Karien Stadler: The development and validation of the Immersive Situational Judgement Test for pilot selection (Prof. Ian. Rothmann and Prof. Marius Stander).

Significant progress were also made by the following PhD students:

- Bianca Arendse: Baptism by fire": Capabilities and functionings of emerging academics in South Africa (Prof. Ian Rothmann).
- Sibusiso Mnxuma: Sustainable employability of industrial psychology and human resource management practitioners: A social justice perspective (Prof. Ian Rothmann, Prof. Marius Stander, Dr Thapelo Chachaa).
- Coen Welsh: Capabilities and functioning of leaders in the Namibian context: The effects of precarious work and orientation towards others (Prof. Ian Rothmann).

Sharing Findings on Well-Being and Sustainable Employability in Prague by Dr Neil Barnard

At the recent European Work and Organizational Psychology Conference in Prague, I had the opportunity to present as part of a symposium titled *Navigating Well-Being in South Africa: Capabilities and Challenges Across Work and Education*. My presentation, *Emergency nurses' burnout-engagement profiles: Investigating the associations with job insecurity appraisal and work capabilities*, discussed how emergency nurses' appraisal of job insecurity shapes their work capabilities and burnout and engagement profiles.

Several colleagues, including Prof. Ian Rothmann, Dr Suzette Ragadu, Dr Mari Ford, Dr Elette Horn, and Mrs Bianca Arendse participated in the symposium. The presentations highlighted different aspects of well-being and sustainable employability across different work contexts in South Africa. The discussants further strengthened the session, Prof. Marius Stander and Prof. Ines Meyer, whose insights facilitated a rich dialogue with the international audience. Feedback was highly positive, and participants noted the relevance of these studies in advancing the global conversation on capabilities, well-being, and sustainable employability.

Beyond the academic exchange, the conference was hosted in the picturesque city of Prague, offering opportunities for exploration alongside its stimulating programme of presentations and networking. Notably, the symposium also highlighted Optentia's visibility and contributions to international scholarship on well-being and sustainable employability, paving the way for promising collaboration with researchers from Tilburg University in the Netherlands. A sincere thank you to Prof. Ian Rothmann and Optentia for enabling us to attend such a prestigious event and for supporting us as emerging researchers in sharing our work on this international stage.

Recent publications by Dr Neil Barnard:

Barnard, N.B., & Coetzee, S. (2025). Understanding the link between nurses' practice environment, emotional exhaustion, compassion satisfaction, and adverse events. *Nursing and Health Sciences*, 27(2):e70132. [doi](#)

Barnard, N. B. (in press). Burnout and engagement profiles of emergency nurses: The role of job insecurity appraisal and capabilities. *Frontiers in Organizational Psychology*, 3. [doi](#)



Dr Elette Horn, Dr Neil Barnard, Prof. Ian Rothmann, Bianca Arendse, Dr Mari Ford, Prof. Marius Stander, and Prof. Innes Meyer

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.

HORA FINITA! Fred Goede's Upcoming PhD Defence at Wageningen University

My PhD defence on 29 September 2025 feels to me like facing the Wageningse Berg. It may not be the highest mountain, but when you are on a bike, keeping pace with your supervisor is still tough. And my Wageningen University supervisor is a renowned cyclist!

I thought to share a few of my experiences about PhD studies with Optentia friends. My research proposal was accepted in 2019, and I am only finishing this year. Why did it take so long?

The title of my thesis gives away some clues: "Safety culture in the high-risk industry sector – bringing behaviour to life in models". You will see that each of the three lessons comes with a caveat- both pros and cons.

- If possible, stick to the discipline that you pursued during your Master's degree, as it is easier and the traditional way to conduct research. The literature has grown on you, and you just delve deeper into the same field. The downside of that approach is that it does not allow interdisciplinary learning, which added a lot of value to my studies. I programmed human behaviour into a model, a truly interdisciplinary approach!
- If you have the luxury, do your PhD full-time, to help you focus on studies only. Other work priorities distract and make the study longer; it is also challenging to write about your workplace experience in an academic manner, a learning experience in itself. The downside of this approach is that the workplace adds significant value to scholarly research, thereby making it more practical and useful. My supervisor even stated that perhaps all PhD studies should be done later in life!
- My studies really gained momentum some three years ago when I set up a weekly catch-up meeting with my

supervisor, 08:00 every Thursday, usually just for 30 minutes. That way, I just had to keep on going, snack writing every single week. When I decided in January 2025 to write this thesis, despite my supervisor's impending retirement, I persevered.

I will, for the rest of my life, wake up at 04:00 on Thursdays in a sweat! In hindsight, I would not have done my PhD any other way.

Now for the next mountain to climb...

P.S. "Hora Finita" is Latin for "the hour has ended", and that is also the name of the online system at Wageningen University that I used to manage my doctoral trajectory.



Here is a picture of Prof. Dr. Gert Jan Hofstede, taken on campus. He is also an extraordinary professor at Optentia

Exploring AI in Research by Prof. J.T. Janse van Rensburg

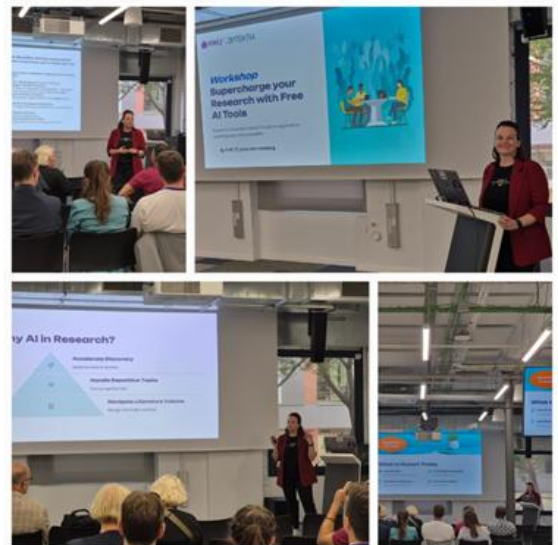
In May 2025, I had the privilege of presenting my first international workshop on AI in the research process at the EdMedia conference in Barcelona, Spain. The workshop was designed to be practical, hands-on, and exploratory, with a focus on showing how AI can support different stages of the research journey. I introduced participants to tools such as Elicit, Perplexity AI, NotebookLM, Gamma, and Napkin AI with each offering a unique way to enhance efficiency, creativity, and critical engagement in research. For example, Elicit helps uncover and compare literature, while Perplexity AI serves as a fact-checking and sense-making companion. Tools like Gamma and Napkin AI enable new ways of presenting and visualising findings.

One of my main goals was to demystify AI for researchers, particularly for those who may feel overwhelmed by its rapid development. Rather than framing AI as a threat to traditional scholarship, I wanted to show it as a partner and a set of tools that can support the rigour, depth, and innovation we value in research. The feedback from participants confirmed that this message resonated.

Walking away from EdMedia 2025, I felt both proud and motivated. Proud to have contributed to international dialogue about AI in research, and motivated to continue building spaces where we can experiment, question, and learn together. Preparing for an international audience required me to step outside my comfort zone, clarify my message, and

anticipate the questions and perspectives of colleagues from very different disciplines and contexts. It was a reminder that growth often happens when we say “yes” to opportunities, even when we feel uncertain.

Most of all, I was reminded that while AI is transforming the research landscape, it is the human curiosity, collaboration, and courage to explore that truly drive academic progress.



Introducing Dr Lance Bunt

Dr Lance Bunt is a lecturer and researcher in the School of Computer Science and Information Systems in the Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences. Dr Bunt has co-developed five registered short courses in collaboration with the Optentia Research Unit, highlighting his interdisciplinary expertise in visual identity, aesthetic design, and creative direction. These courses, alongside his serious games, exemplify his ability to merge artistic design, scholarly engagement, and societal relevance in ways that extend the impact of NWU's research and teaching culture. Lance grew up with a fascination for both technology and how people learn, shaping me into someone who values creativity, discipline, and purposeful work. His studies in Communication, IT, and Education gave me a unique perspective on teaching and research, enabling him to bridge design, gameful learning, and pedagogy. What he values most is curiosity and the ability to bring information and knowledge to life for others.

His career began as an e-learning developer, where he gained experience in digital learning design and innovation. Today, as a senior lecturer at North-West University, he endeavours to channel creativity into his teaching and research. Completing a PhD in IT in 2023, presenting at international conferences, and co-designing educational games such as CiteSaga and Dogs of War have been milestones that highlight his commitment to playful pedagogy, cognitive technologies, and gameful learning.

For Lance, excellence in teaching and research lies in continuous innovation, reflection, and service. "Academics are stewards of their communities, as we are called to cultivate students' talents, design bespoke creations that fit real needs, and unite attention to detail with imagination. Ultimately, our role is to serve society through knowledge that is alive, relevant, and transformative."



Dr Lance Bunt

Photo by Ms Riëtte Drevin and Dr Lance Bunt

Read a recently published chapter on technology and well-being co-authored by Lance:

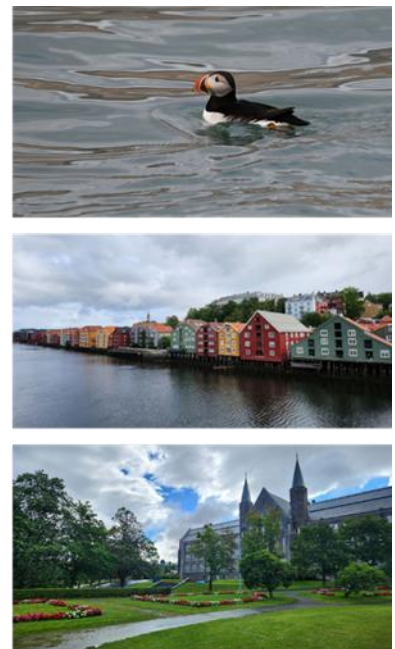
Rothmann, S., Greeff, J., Bunt, L. (2025). Technology and well-being: Perspectives from the capability approach. In: A. van Niekerk, N. Harry, & M. Coetzee (Eds) Unlocking sustainable wellbeing in the digital age: Human well-being research and policy making (pp. 235-263). Springer, Cham. [doi](#)

From Fochville to Trondheim: A Transformative Exchange *by Ivan Putter*

I'm Ivan Putter, a registered Industrial Psychologist from Fochville with a background in accounting and mining, and now in the final year of my PhD in Industrial Psychology. I was honoured to join the UTFORSK NWU–NTNU (funded by the Norwegian Directorate for Higher Education and Skills) exchange programme, which not only supported research collaboration but also strengthened educational ties between the two universities. During my month in Norway, I completed the final manuscript of my thesis and gained valuable insights into different approaches to teaching and supervision.

The experience was enriching: the warm embrace of NTNU's staff, the commitment and hard work evident in their research outputs, and the opportunity to collaborate with colleagues who bring fresh perspectives from a different cultural context.

My NWU network made the transition seamless and facilitated rewarding academic partnerships. Exploring the city of Trondheim and immersing myself in the Scandinavian way of life added depth to this journey. This visit not only advanced my research but also created lifelong connections. I am deeply grateful to both institutions for making this possible and look forward to continued collaboration and shared learning.



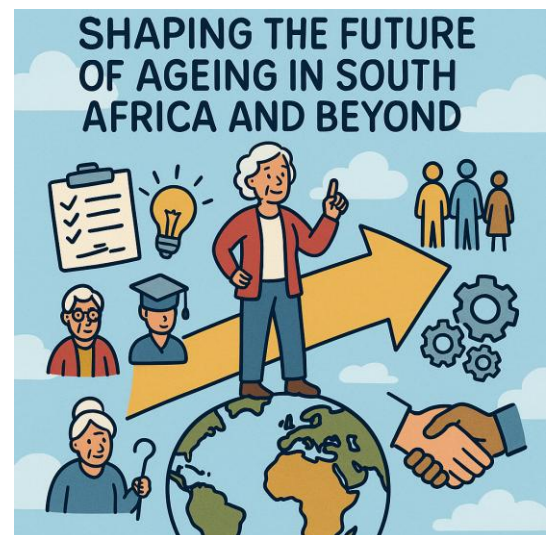
Prof. Anne Iversen, Marit Christensen, Ivan Putter, Leon de Beer, Leoni van der Vaart, and Emmanuel Aboagye:

Prof. Rayne Stroebel: Shaping the Future of Ageing in South Africa and Beyond

In his role as an Extraordinary Professor in the Ageing and Generational Dynamics in Africa programme at the Optentia Research Unit, North-West University, Dr Stroebel is making significant contributions to advancing relationship-centred models of care. Rayne's work in the field of ageing is guided by his conviction that compassion and presence are powerful forces for transforming society.

Rayne's work in the field of ageing is guided by his conviction that compassion and presence are powerful forces for transforming society. Rayne contributes globally through his leadership at the International Longevity Centre South Africa (ILCSA), where he collaborates with international colleagues on research and advocacy projects related to dementia and ageing, ensuring that African perspectives are represented in global discourse. His participation in international conferences affirms his role as a thought leader redefining what it means to age well—placing dignity, relationships, and joy at the heart of care. As the founder and managing director of GERATEC (Gerontological Research, Training, Education, and Caring), Rayne has become a leading voice in inspiring residential and community care in South Africa, grounded in the Eden Alternative philosophy. Guided by the values of integrity, respect, compassion, and innovation, he has facilitated change in how services are delivered and how ageing itself is understood. By promoting meaningful relationships, personal growth, and organisational renewal, he has supported care providers in placing connection and joy at the centre of their daily practice. Alongside his practical leadership, Rayne offers consultation services to families, organisations, and

policymakers, ensuring that knowledge is translated into stronger support systems and an improved quality of life for older people. We are delighted that you have joined AGenDA, Rayne, and extend to you a sincere and enthusiastic welcome. Your vision, expertise, and passion for reimagining ageing will enrich our work and inspire new possibilities for the future of care.



Prof. Rayne Stroebel

Advancing Brain Health and Dementia Care: Dr Kirti Ranchad

Dr Kirti Ranchod, a Johannesburg-based neurologist, works at the intersection of medicine, culture, and society to address pressing challenges in brain health and ageing. Her strong commitment to public education and the inclusion of community resources in health strategies complements her clinical expertise in memory and dementia. Dr Ranchod highlights how local assets—such as cultural practices and community networks—can support brain health. By drawing attention to Africa's wealth, she highlights the continent's distinctive contributions and methodologies to global brain health initiatives. Her fellowship experience has further deepened her understanding of health systems worldwide, allowing her to critically assess which models are workable in contexts such as South Africa. One of her significant initiatives is the FUNDISA project (Framework for Understanding Neurocognitive Disorders via Indigenous Systems in South Africa). The project addresses the long-standing exclusion of Traditional Healing Practitioners (THPs) from dementia research and policy. Recognising that most South Africans engage with THPs as part of their healthcare, Dr Ranchod works to establish structured collaboration between THPs and medical doctors. Through bidirectional knowledge exchange,



Prof. Kirti Ranchad

FUNDISA challenges the divide between Indigenous Knowledge Systems and biomedical models, offering an integrated pathway for more equitable and effective dementia care. Dr Ranchod also contributes to international dialogues on the brain economy, a framework that positions brain health and brain capital as central to economic resilience and social well-being. She is the founder of Memorability (www.memorability.co), a neuroscience-based brain health initiative that translates research on brain health into practical tools for individuals and organisations. Through Memorability, she extends her academic and clinical work into accessible strategies that build resilience, support cognitive performance, and promote mental well-being in everyday contexts. In addition, she serves as the co-lead for strategy at the Africa Brain Health Network (ABHN, www.africabrainhealth.com), a collaborative platform that 'envision[s] promoting brain health through education, research, and community collaboration, grounded in plural knowledge systems and the

interconnectedness of individual, collective, cultural, environmental, and spiritual well-being'. Motivated by the expected rise in dementia cases and other neurological disorders nationally, and by the impact of various factors on brain performance, Kirti also focuses on brain training initiatives to reduce risk and enhance better performance. Through her clinical practice, research, advocacy, and other brain health initiatives, Dr Kirti Ranchod is contributing to a more inclusive understanding of brain health in South Africa—one that values community resources, bridges medical and traditional systems, and places health promotion and prevention at the centre of the response to support better brain health. Kirti warmly and wholeheartedly welcome you to Optentia.

Prof. Vera Roos: Listening to Older Voices, Exploring Future Care

I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to attend the funded HOMeAGE Advancing Research and Training on Ageing, Place and Home event in Utrecht (April 2025). It was a privilege to engage with international colleagues, early-stage researchers, and practitioners who share a commitment to advancing inclusive, evidence-based approaches to ageing.

The HOMeAGE programme represents a nine-country collaboration involving leading research units, major intergovernmental organisations, international civil society actors, and both governmental and nongovernmental organisations. It aims to establish an interdisciplinary, intersectoral, and global programme of doctoral training and research that develops a new generation of leaders in evidence-based innovation for ageing in place.

Through the work of Doctoral Researchers (DRs),

HOMeAGE addresses three interrelated challenges: identifying flexible and sustainable housing, community-care, and mobility systems (Needs and Systems); developing innovative place-based pathways for engagement that foster belonging (Home and Belonging); and creating integrative frameworks that support rights-based policy development responsive to the diversity of older people (Rights and Voice).

During the programme, I delivered a presentation on the Mmogo-method, which fosters research participation among older adults in low- and middle-income countries. Derived from the Setswana word "mmogo," meaning "together" or "building together," the method facilitates the active participation of older individuals in research that transcends barriers of age, culture, and language. My presentation illustrated how the method's four phases generate textual, visual, and observational data that enrich understanding of complex social topics such as belonging, care, and relational experiences. In my presentation, I highlighted how this data-collection method aligns with the

Madrid International Plan of Action, emphasising the right of older adults to participate in research and benefit from its outcomes. An interactive discussion on cultural sensitivity, adaptability, and community engagement reinforced the method's relevance in diverse contexts.

The visit to the Future Care Labs provided examples of how assistive technologies can support older individuals' agency and promote ageing in place. The HOMeAGE event combined engaging scholarly presentations with stimulating informal exchanges with the DRs. In reflecting on the experience, I was inspired by how the programme was designed as an intergenerational contact zone (ICZ), where younger and older researchers and practitioners engage in mutual learning and perspective-taking. I look forward to following the DRs' inspiring research, as the HOMeAGE programme provides them with a roadmap for developing conceptual frameworks and practical approaches that can generate innovative solutions to address the challenges and realise the opportunities presented by ageing populations.



Future labs



Prof. Vera Roos

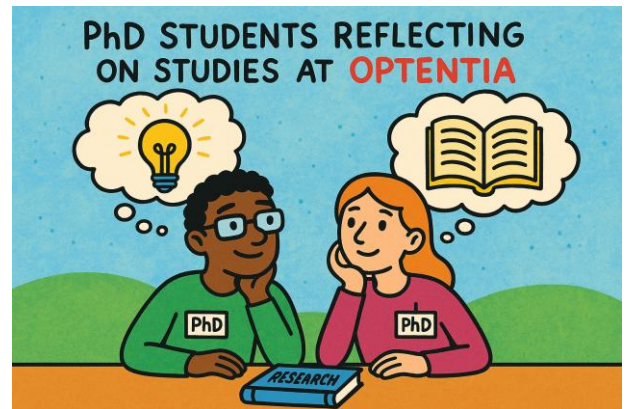
Reflecting on my PhD Study by Susan O'Reilly

I am excited to share that I have officially entered the data collection phase of my doctoral research—an important and meaningful step in this journey. I remain deeply grateful for the unwavering support of my study leaders, Prof. Vera Roos and Prof. Ansie Kitching. Their guidance has encouraged me to step outside of my comfort zone and engage meaningfully with school environments.

My study, "A critical analysis of the expectations and experiences of respect as a doorway for developing value-driven schools," focuses on respect as it is experienced in everyday interactions. I am interested in how teachers, learners, parents, and school leaders experience and express respect, and how these relational practices inform school culture.

The research is situated in two Gauteng, South African schools: one in Quintile 2, a no-fee school serving disadvantaged learners, and one in Quintile 4, a fee-paying school that supplements limited government funding through school fees. This contrast enables me to examine how socio-economic contexts inform both the expectations and the experiences of respect.

To gather these insights, I am analysing school policies, interviewing stakeholders, observing classroom dynamics, and creating spaces where learners can share their experiences. Working across these diverse contexts has already deepened my awareness of the challenges faced by schools, as well as the possibilities that emerge when respect is truly practised.



I hope that this research will add value academically while also contributing to practical improvements within the school communities it serves.



Susan O'Reilly

PhD Reflections

Francois Riekert

A PhD isn't a solo sport

At Optentia, I have found the team I needed—cohort supervision, cross-disciplinary expertise, and the committed guidance of Prof. Jaco Hoffman and Prof. Vera Roos. The encouraging academic environment at Optentia not only fosters critical thinking but also ensures that research remains grounded in real-world relevance. The cohort supervision model has been one of the most valuable aspects of this journey, creating a space where we can learn, question, and grow together in a stimulating and supportive way. My research, *"Toward Multiple Agile Retirements in South Africa: Defining Foundational Life Course Elements Shaping Age-Related Vulnerabilities and Longevity Assets"*, seeks to advance both academic understanding and practical solutions. By rethinking retirement through the lenses of health span, adaptability, and life-course perspectives, I aim to make a meaningful contribution to the global academic community while providing valuable tools for navigating a rapidly changing world.



Francois Riekert



Danie le Roux

Danie le Roux

PhD Research with a Purpose: A Strategic Journey at Optentia

Coming from a professional background where clear outcomes and sustained focus are essential, I initially expected the PhD journey to be a solitary and arduous one. Optentia quickly changed that perception. From the outset, the PhD in Social Science with Ageing and Development offered a structured, high-impact support system that reflects the best of collaborative leadership and academic excellence. The Khaya iBubesi writing retreat in April 2025 set the tone: a focused, in-person immersion where access to technical support, international speakers, and direct input from supervisors accelerated our onboarding. It wasn't just informative; it was truly enabling. Since then, the three-monthly cohort sessions and individual supervision have provided consistent, strategic touchpoints. This is a research environment that values both independence and interdependence—exactly what is needed to sustain long-term, meaningful scholarship. At Optentia, pursuing a PhD is not only about earning a qualification. It's about contributing to a body of knowledge that is socially relevant, future-oriented, and deeply collaborative. I am grateful to be a part of this mission and proud to be contribute to it.

Community Engagement Through the Bereka Girl Summit *by Prof. Carol Hermann*

On 29 August 2025, the Bereka Girl ("Working Girl") Summit, hosted at Ratshidi Hall in Mahikeng, brought together more than 350 sex workers from the local area under the auspices of TBHIV Care. The event was designed to provide a supportive and affirming platform for participants, addressing issues of resilience, health, and well-being in a context too often marked by marginalisation and stigma. As part of my registered community engagement project, CARE, I was invited to address the summit on the topic of resilience in the workplace, with a focus on self-care and motivation.

The summit was intentionally structured to embody positivity, energy, and affirmation. Icebreaker songs and activities punctuated the programme, creating a space where participants could engage not only intellectually but also emotionally and somatically. This atmosphere was critical in establishing a non-judgmental environment, one in which participants' lived experiences were acknowledged without moralising or pathologising.

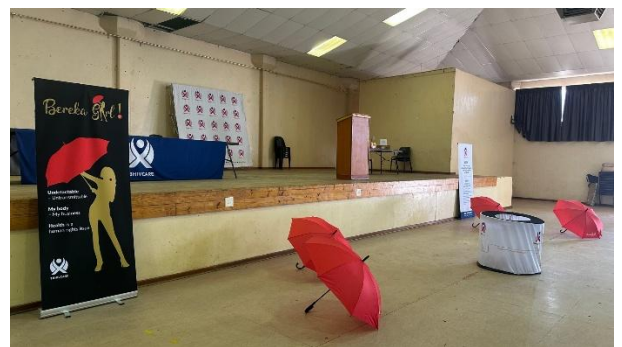
In my presentation, I utilised guided imagery as a tool to illustrate the power of the human mind. The "sucking on an imaginary lemon" exercise was designed to elicit physical responses, such as salivation and facial tension, through purely mental suggestion. The activity was received with delight, reinforcing the central message that imagination can influence bodily and emotional states. This simple yet impactful exercise demonstrated the accessibility of psychological techniques that can be integrated into daily self-care practices.

The address concluded with practical mindfulness and resilience strategies. These included breathing exercises, reframing negative self-talk, and cultivating supportive peer networks. The emphasis was on sustainability and agency:

strategies that participants could apply independently in their daily contexts. This focus aligned with the broader ethos of the CARE project, which seeks to enhance psychosocial well-being through empowerment rather than dependency.

From an academic perspective, the Bereka Girl Summit highlights the value of community engagement as reciprocal and dialogical. The university, through projects such as CARE, does not "deliver" knowledge to communities but co-creates spaces where existing strengths are recognised. By engaging sex workers in a context marked by historical stigma, the summit underscored the importance of affirming identity and dignity.

The Bereka Girl Summit represents a model for meaningful outreach that bridges academia and community realities. For scholars in community psychology and public health, the event reaffirms that knowledge dissemination is most impactful when conducted with empathy, creativity, and respect. Engagement of this nature not only enhances participants' capacities for self-care and resilience but also enriches academic practice through reciprocal learning. The CARE project remains committed to building on these partnerships, recognising that authentic community engagement is central to both social justice and scholarly relevance.



A Foundational Handbook on Presence *by* Prof. Andries Baart

In June, Andries Baart published *Iemand voor Iemand. Handboek Presentie* (Someone for Someone: Handbook Presence). In an era where the human dimension is becoming increasingly important in fields such as care, social work, nursing, and counselling, the presence approach provides a powerful and radical response to the growing need for relational and people-oriented support. This handbook is an indispensable reference work for those wishing to work according to this approach.

The handbook is the culmination of over 30 years of practical experience, experimentation, research, education, and thorough study. It provides a comprehensive theoretical foundation for the presence approach and demonstrates its practical application in various fields. From youth and elderly care, psychiatry, and education to working with vulnerable groups in poverty, labour, and housing, Presence offers an answer to how we can improve care to be more attentive and relational.

Whether you are researching care and caring relationships, teaching them, developing policies, working as a quality officer, or working in the field as a practitioner, *Iemand voor Iemand* offers a wealth of knowledge and inspiration. The handbook provides a structured argument that can be followed from start to finish and is organised into chapters that can be used separately. Additionally, the many practical examples and case studies enable readers to bridge the gap between theory and practice immediately.

This publication fulfils three long-cherished wishes: (1) a practice-oriented book on presence suitable for educating and training students and practitioners; (2) a handbook on presence for researchers and teachers who want to delve deeper into the fundamentals and background; and (3) an English-language book on presence tailored to a global

audience and international issues, literature, and developments. This book was recently launched at a festive [seminar](#) hosted by Optentia. Mission completed?



The book launch in Potchefstroom
Watch the video

- Beurskens, E., Van der Linde, M., & Baart, A. (2020). *Praktijkboek presentie* [Practice Book Presence]. Uitgeverij Coutinho. (4th edition, 2024, 216 pp.; planned update 2026).
- Baart, A. (2025). *Iemand voor Iemand: Handboek Presentie*. [Somebody for somebody. Handbook of Presence}. Uitgeverij Boom (909 pp.).
- Baart, A. and Timmerman, G. (2024). *Relational Caring and Presence Theory in Health Care and Social Work: A Care-Ethical Perspective*. Policy Press (263 pp.).



The Letlotlo Project by Dr Tamlynn Jefferis

The Letlotlo Project is a registered community engagement project with the NWU and officially started in March 2024. The Letlotlo Project (LP), meaning treasure, is a community-based research collaboration between the NWU, YouthMustRise! (YMR), and LUSA Community Chest. We aim to promote community resilience and, ultimately, individual resilience through a trauma-informed lens, specifically Polyvagal Theory. We ground our understandings of multi-systemic and community resilience in nervous system regulation, with the knowledge that co-regulation is a biological imperative and must be established before self-regulation. Through the lens of nervous system regulation, we aim to promote embodied resilience in trauma-informed approaches at both the community and individual levels. To achieve this goal, we have developed relationships with our community partners over the past five years. Our mission is to facilitate healing and foster embodied resilience with and for children and youth in our community.



The Steering Committee of the project

The Letlotlo Project has received ethics approval to begin our formative phase of the project, which will involve community-mapping focus groups to gain detailed contextual insights into the risks and resources currently available in our research site, Deneysville in the Free State Province. Once we have analysed

the initial data, we (the steering committee) will collaborate and negotiate the next steps for the project. We currently have one master's student, Ms. Beandra Viljoen (focused on community resilience), and one Doctoral student, Ms. Katlego Molokoe, in the project (focused on resilience among child- and youth-headed households). Ms. Molokoe, Dr. Vedhna Lalla, and I are also working on an article focused on expanding the definitions of child- and youth-headed households to the global community. This article will form one of a special issue for Child Protection and Practice, that Dr Vedhna Lalla, Prof. Caroll Hermann, and I are guest editors for. For more information on the call for papers, click [here](#).

The steering committee of the LP consists of researchers at the NWU (Dr Tamlynn Jefferis (Psychology), Mr. Lawrence Mamabolo (Psychology), Dr. Christiaan Bekker (Psychology), Dr Mandla Dlamini (Geospatial Sciences), and our new team member Prof. Caroll Hermann) and Prof. Linda Liebenberg (extraordinary professor of Optentia). Our other steering committee members are our community partners: Phill Zwane, Karabo Nkoli, Prince Lesito, Jeany Radebe, Kamohelo Letsatsi, Mamokgethi Maloka, Neo Huto, and Abraham Mohapi (community elder). Our first goal was to fully establish our relationship with our community partners in line with the true nature of community-based research.

Earlier this year, we attended the Gala Dinner hosted by YouthMustRise! I was a guest speaker at this event. I had the honour of sharing some experiences of our collaboration up to now, and I was awarded with three certificates of recognition for continue support of YouthMustRise! and were awarded with three certificates. My master's student, Ms. Beandra Viljoen, also attended and was awarded a certificate of recognition for her support of the organisation. It was an honour and privilege to speak at and share in this fantastic event and celebrate the achievements of youth who strive to advocate for better quality lives both with and for our South African children and youth.

The Letlotlo Project by Dr Tamlynn Jefferis

The Letlotlo Project Current Contributions: Community Glimmers

During the initial stages of the project, we were invited to attend an Open Mic Night hosted by YouthMustRise! in Deneysville. At this event, various youth in the community came together to showcase a variety of their creative artworks. Mr Karabo Nkoli (the youngest published author in South Africa) shared some of his books, Mr Prince Lesito recited his own poetry, Ms. Jeany Radebe sang, and other youth showcased various drawings and paintings they created. The most profound aspect of this evening was witnessing the unique space these young people have made in their community. While showcasing their art and books, singing and reciting deeply personal poetry, they all came together. They accepted one another unconditionally, cheering each other's successes and continuously validating one another as they expressed their art. In Polyvagal Theory, glimmers are considered the opposites of triggers (events that trigger the nervous system into fight/flight/fawn/ freeze). Glimmers are micro-moments of regulation that soothe the nervous system. I began to reflect on what a community-level glimmer might look like, and this Open Mic Night was a community glimmer. These youth came together and created a unique space within their community characterised by safety and connection. Every artwork was accepted, celebrated, and validated. These youth have created a space so distinctive that, within a community faced with adversity and trauma, they already embody the principles of Polyvagal Theory and create safety with and for one another.

Mr Mamabolo and I were invited to present this at the 16th African Regional Workshop hosted by UNISA under the

theme Cultural Resilience and Responsive Interventions: Bridging Modernity and Indigenous Wisdom in Addressing Africa's Challenges.



Photo collage from Open Mic Night hosted by YouthMustRise! presented at the 16th African Regional Workshop



Ms. Beandra Viljoen, Mr. Karabo Nkoli, Dr. Tamlynn Jefferis – YouthMustRise! Gala Dinner

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GlimmerGPT Intermediate Psychological Support Intervention

Another exciting project underway is the GlimmerGPT project. GlimmerGPT is an AI LLM that I developed as a trauma-informed interactive journal. The GPT draws from Polyvagal Theory and includes other works from well-known researchers: Bessel van der Kolk, Peter Levine, Gabor Maté, Stephen Porges, Deb Dana, Ann Masten, among others. The GPT also draw on Cognitive Behavioural Theory and is designed to reflect with the user and provide prompts that have been scientifically proven to be grounding and support nervous system regulation.

I initially created this GPT for my own personal use and found it to be quite helpful and practical. I then came across a study by Dartmouth University that showed impressive findings after conducting a randomised control trial with a similar program named Therabot. Considering the inequality in South Africa and the sparse mental health resources, our team has decided to focus on first rigorously testing GlimmerGPT to potentially roll out to students at the NWU and our broader community as an intermediate psychological support tool, at no cost.

We are currently developing a proposal to determine which platform would be best suited for this GPT. Next, we plan to rigorously test the GPT with experts (psychologists, social workers, counsellors, both in academia and practice) to evaluate the responses and to consider all potential risk factors in making use of such a tool, to ensure that when this is rolled out, it will be safe. Prof. Caroll Hermann and I presented the GlimmerGPT to NWU Student Life, who enthusiastically offered institutional support and expressed their willingness to support the project with the possibility of eventually delivering the GPT to NWU students at no cost.

The current team consists of: Dr Tamlynn Jefferis (Project lead), Prof Japie Greeff, Prof. Caroll Hermann, Dr. Vedhna Lalla, Dr. Ingrid Opperman, and Mr. Lawrence Mamabolo, all from Optentia and the NWU. Our Canadian collaborators for this project are Prof. Aislin Mushquash and Mr. Ishaq Malik from Lakehead University, and Prof. Christine Wekerle, who is an extraordinary professor in Optentia and is officially based at McMaster University in Ontario, Canada.



Mr. Prince Lesito, Ms. Jeany Radebe, Mr Karabo Nkoli

"Only a life lived for others is a life worthwhile."
Albert Einstein

Note: To read a summary of the Dartmouth study, please click [here](#).

In Her Own Words: Dr Lynelle Coxen

My academic journey began in 2015, when I joined the School of Industrial Psychology and Human Resource Management as an assistant. While completing my master's degree, I continued on fixed-term contracts until I was appointed as a lecturer in 2018. In 2023, I completed my PhD, was promoted to senior lecturer, and assumed the role of research programme leader for the School of Industrial Psychology and Human Resource Management. Alongside my academic career, I am a registered industrial psychologist and psychometrist, which strengthens the applied relevance of my teaching and research. Integrity is central to my work, particularly in safeguarding research ethics, while curiosity drives me to explore new statistical methods and pursue rigorous quantitative research.

Although I am still shaping my research identity, I am drawn to leadership, employee well-being, and motivation, particularly through the lens of self-determination theory. More recently, I have become interested in intrapersonal cognitive demands such as maladaptive perfectionism, imposter syndrome, and work-related rumination. My PhD further deepened my interest in intensive longitudinal designs. To date, I have published seven peer-reviewed articles and a book chapter, garnering over 550 citations.

Excellence in teaching and research, in my view, rests on clear communication, methodological depth, continual development, resilience, digital literacy, and making complex ideas meaningful for students.

About Dr Lynelle Coxen

Lynelle's research focuses on how daily workplace experiences – such as leader and colleague behaviours – influence motivation, well-being, and performance. She has published in high-quality international journals, with her work cited more than 500 times, and regularly presents at international conferences, including the

European Conference on Positive Psychology in 2024. Using innovative methods like diary studies, Dr Coxen examines the dynamics of basic psychological needs in work contexts, offering valuable insights for both research and practice.

Recent Publications

- Coxen, L., Van der Vaart, L., Van den Broeck, A., & Rothmann, S. (2021). Basic psychological needs in the work context: A systematic literature review of diary studies. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, Article 698526. [doi](#).
- Coxen, L., van der Vaart, L., Van den Broeck, A., Rothmann, S. & Schreurs, B. (2023). What matters more for daily well- and ill-being? The dual pathways of daily need satisfaction and frustration. *Current Psychology*, 42, 32552–32565. [doi](#)
- Coxen, L., van der Vaart, L., Van den Broeck, A., Rothmann, S., & Schreurs, B. Do daily leader and colleague behaviours matter for work effort? The role of daily basic psychological needs is satisfaction and frustration. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*. [doi](#)



Dr Lynelle Coxen and Prof. Marius Stander at a recent conference in Prague

INCHE Celebrates 50th Anniversary in Africa *by Prof. Marita Heyns:*

INCHE, the International Network for Christian Higher Education, was established in 1975 in Potchefstroom, South Africa. Since then, the organisation has rapidly expanded into a global network with the primary aim of promoting Christian values in higher education, emphasising professional development, scholarship, and capacity building.

This year, INCHE celebrated its golden jubilee with various conferences held across different regions worldwide. The African conference took place at CORAT Africa in Nairobi, Kenya, from July 7-9, 2025. Co-hosted by Daystar University, the event focused on strengthening the Christian fabric in African higher education through impactful discussions over three days.

The conference resonated deeply with Colossians 1:10, highlighting the importance of bearing fruit in all that a Christian does, aligning with INCHE's mission to weave Christ's love into every aspect of university life and to shape hearts and minds for Christ. A key theme was exploring how Christian institutions can serve as catalysts for faith-based social transformation.

One of the keynote speakers, Prof. Damaris Parsitau of Calvin University, USA, a native of Kenya, highlighted Africa's remarkable Christian growth, with over 734 million believers and a rapid increase in public and private Christian higher education institutions across the continent. This trend presents both challenges and opportunities, particularly in addressing ongoing social, economic, and political crises such as corruption, poverty, and moral decline. The conference also considered how Christian higher education can be reimagined as a catalyst for moral renewal, ethical leadership, and human flourishing. Key questions included how faith can be integrated across disciplines to address Africa's urgent issues and how Christian universities can

serve as laboratories for real-world solutions rooted in biblical principles.

During the conference, Prof. Marita Heyns presented two papers: one on developing a questionnaire to assess nuanced differences in students' worldviews and another exploring the relationship between faith growth and various online learning modalities.

The event concluded with an inspiring call for Christian higher education to move beyond institutional growth and become agents of life-giving social transformation—fostering a continent where faith and learning collaboratively build a just, thriving society.



Prof. Marita Heyns and Prof. Damaris Parsitau at the INCHE Africa Conference



Daystar University and the International Network for Christian Higher Education (INCHE) hosted the INCHE Africa Conference at Corat Africa Nairobi.

A Joyful Homecoming to Optentia House *by Lynn Booysen*

8 July 2025 was a joyous day. On 8 July, Optentians began moving back into Optentia House. Optentia House, with a brand-new roof and fresh walls! After five months of working in shared spaces, the return to Optentia House brought a profound sense of joy, relief, and renewed energy to the Optentia team.

Although the main reason for the re-vamp was to replace the outdated (and potentially toxic) asbestos roof, we are hugely grateful for the updated lapa, the covered walkway linking all the offices, and many minor fixes. The smaller renovation projects, though modest in scale and probably not noticeable to everybody (and Kele), had a discernible impact: updated spaces felt more functional, fresh and more aligned with the collaborative spirit that defines Optentia. The addition of the new roof is not only a safer option, but it also updates Optentia House.



All thanks to the excellent Sebedisan team, and our colleagues from facilities Kholofelo and Thuli, to name but a few! Tumi from Roche got the garden back into shape, and Ayanda helped with everything! We were amazed at how quickly we moved back in within two days, and then it still took two weeks to 'settle in. Now, with the new green of spring, we know we are 'home'.



Replacing the roof of Optentia House



Moving back to Optentia House



The new Optentia House

Recommended Books and Chapters

- Booth, W.C., Colomb, G.G., Williams, J.M., Bizup, J., & Fitzgerald, W.T. (2024). *The craft of research* (5th ed.). University of Chicago Press.
- De Neve, J.E., & Ward, G. (2025). *Why workplace wellbeing matters: The science behind employee happiness and organizational performance*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press.
- Heemstra, J. (2025). *Labwork to leadership: A concise guide to thriving in the science job you weren't trained for*. Harvard University Press.
- Hobsbawm, J. (2024). *Working assumptions: What we thought we knew about work before Covid and generative AI – and what we know now*. London: Whitefox Publishing.
- Kaufman, S.B. (2025). *Rise above: Overcome a victim mindset, empower yourself and realise your full potential*. London: Penguin Random House.
- Rothmann, S., Greeff, J., Bunt, L. (2025). Technology and well-being: Perspectives from the capability approach. In: A. van Niekerk, N. Harry, & M. Coetzee (Eds.), *Unlocking sustainable wellbeing in the digital age: Human well-being research and policy making* (pp. 235-263). Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-87616-5_12
- Van Nieuwerburgh, C., & Biswas-Diener, R. (2025). *Radical listening: The art of true connection*. Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.



Optentia Colleagues taking a break after an Artificial Intelligence workshop