

Special points of interest:

- * Focus on social impact and sustainability
- * Understand manager expectations to build sustainable employability
- * The scientific productivity of Optentia-affiliated staff is exceptional
- * Optentia is working on a strategy to develop capabilities of emerging academics
- * Two short courses in mentoring are presented from January 2023

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The Chance in Change ...

University education will likely undergo significant changes over the next ten years, driven evolving workforce demands by technological advancements, and changing student expectations.

- Social impact and sustainability: Universities will emphasise social impact and sustainability, encouraging students to address global challenges and contribute to a more equitable and sustainable world.
- Global collaboration and cross-cultural learning: This includes international partnerships, virtual exchange programs, and international study opportunities.
- Entrepreneurial and innovative thinking: Universities will nurture entrepreneurial and innovative thinking among students, equipping them with the skills and mindset to create their opportunities and contribute to economic growth.
- Data-driven decision making: Universities will increasingly adopt data-driven approaches to improve teaching and learning, student outcomes, and resource allocation.
- Lifelong learning and re-skilling: The need for continuous learning and re-skilling



will become increasingly important as job roles evolve and new technologies emerge.

- Personalised and blended learning: Traditional lecture-based instruction will give way to more personalised and blended learning approaches (e.g., adaptive learning platforms, online modules, and self-paced courses).
- Micro credentials and skills-focused education: The focus will shift from traditional degree programmes to more flexible and skills-based education.
- Technology-enhanced learning experiences: Virtual reality, augmented reality, and other immersive technologies will be used to create realistic simulations, interactive learning environments, and

virtual field trips.

- Increased online and remote learning: Online and remote learning options will continue to expand, greater flexibility and accessibility for students worldwide.

From a social sciences perspective, concepts such as sustainability (in precarious contexts), psychological safety, capability, cross-cultural learning, care, decent and meaningful work, hope, flourishing and optimal functioning, entrepreneurial and innovative thinking, digital learning, open science and data-driven decision making have to be addressed in teaching and learning, research, and community engagement programmes. Our chance is to contribute to a just society, characterised by a decent and meaningful life for all.

Performance of Optentia

A total of 40 permanent staff members, 63 Master's students, 50 PhD students, and two post-doctoral fellows participate in Optentia. From May 2022 to May 2023, 29 (6 PhD and 23 Master's) students completed their studies. A total of 11 master's and six PhD students submitted their dissertations and theses for examination in November 2023. Optentia researchers have published 65,63 peer-reviewed articles, peer-reviewed chapters in books, and peer-reviewed conference papers during 2023. Optentia researchers were involved in nine community engagement projects. Optentia experienced a challenging year characterised by intense investment in the external evaluation of the research entity, preparing for and submitting funding applications,



supervising master's and PhD students, developing and presenting short learning programmes and short courses, net-

working with national and international institutions, and participating in the development of our capabilities.

"Optentia experienced a challenging year characterised by intense investment in the external evaluation of the research entity ..."

The Optentia Scorecard by Prof. Ian Rothmann

Output	2021	2022	2023
Peer-reviewed article equivalents	78.69	98.09*	65.63
Papers: Conferences	26	9	27
Participating Master's students	22	34	63
Completed Master's students	22	23	5
Participating PhD students	46	52	50
Completed PhD students	2	6	10
Post-doctoral fellows	1	1	2
Number of workshops presented	13	10	19
Number of workshop participants	700	250	619 (222)

Note: Statistics on 30 November 2023

* Not audited

Capability Development at Optentia

Optentia has presented various webinars and programmes to build the competencies of participants during 2023. The following events took place in from June 2023:

- 29 May 2023 - Prof. A. Morin: Forest and the Trees in Psychometric Measurement: The Bifactor-ESEM framework.
- 24 July 2023 - Ms E. Bothma, Dr N. Barnard: Mplus for beginners.
- 1 August 2023 - Prof. S. Rothmann, Dr N. Barnard and Prof. M. Nel: Academic mentoring.
- 4-5 September 2023 - C. Jacobs and Lauren Gelfand: Applying for research funding
- 1-30 October 2023 - Prof. C. Geiser: Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses with Mplus.
- 13 December 2023 - Prof. D. Kuldina: ChatGPT in education: ethical considerations.
- 13-14 December 2023 - Prof. Rens van de Schoot, Jelle Teijema, Prof and Prof. Duco Veen: Open Science and Research Methodology: The way forward.



Career Development: Manager Expectations of New Graduates

A lack of employability attributes is often suggested as one of the main reasons for the existing new graduate supply-demand gap. A study by Steurer et al. (2023) aimed to empirically explore managerial expectations of new graduate employability attributes and what managers are prepared to do to enable new graduates in this regard. Not being able to find qualified candidates hampers productivity. In addition, it also limits new graduates' prospects of finding sustainable employment.

The researchers analysed the data using qualitative content analysis. Six main attributes were extracted from the data: Being self-determined (making choices and managing their own lives); harnessing knowledge and learning (using and developing knowledge and skills); having a positive attitude (solving problems and dealing with challenges

and setbacks); believing in oneself (having humility and self-confidence); having good relationships with others (being sensitive towards the organisational culture and relating well to others) and managerial capacity building (managers' coaching and mentor roles that are critical to enable new graduates).

Understanding managerial expectations should guide industry, higher education institutions and government in developing evidence-based interventions focussing on the relevant aspects

of new graduate employability attributes. The findings of this study provide an empirically grounded description of six broad new graduate attributes that managers value.

Steurer, M., Van der Vaart, L., & Rothmann, S. (2023). Managerial expectations of graduate employability attributes: An empirical study. *SA Journal of Industrial Psychology/SA Tydskrif vir Bedryfsielkunde*, 49(0), a2081. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajip.v49i0.2081>



"Optentia presented training and development to 841 people during 2023."

Inaugural Lecture Explores Trust in the Workplace

Prof Marita Heyns, a researcher at the North-West University's (NWU's) Optentia research unit on the Vanderbijlpark Campus, recently delivered her inaugural professorial lecture titled "Trust @work". The hybrid event brought together academics, family members, and friends from various parts of the globe. Prof Heyns selected one of her research interests - how trust manifests within organisational settings - as the subject of her inaugural address. During her lecture, she highlighted various



Prof. Marita Heyns after her inaugural lecture

themes that offered a unique perspective on the relevance of trust for work environments, and which also illustrated the mechanisms involved in the configuration of trust within these settings. Click [here](#) to read more. Click [here](#) to watch the inaugural lecture on YouTube.

"The productivity of Optentia is exceptional compared to similar research entities within the higher education context..."

Optentia's External Evaluation

An external evaluation of the Optentia Research Unit took place from 28-30 August 2023: The overall quality, performance, productivity and impact of Optentia Research Unit (Optentia) was assessed by an external panel (the Panel) in terms of specific criteria stipulated by the North-West University, namely the scientific quality, scientific productivity, relevance, viability and management of the research entity. The Panel made the following conclusions:

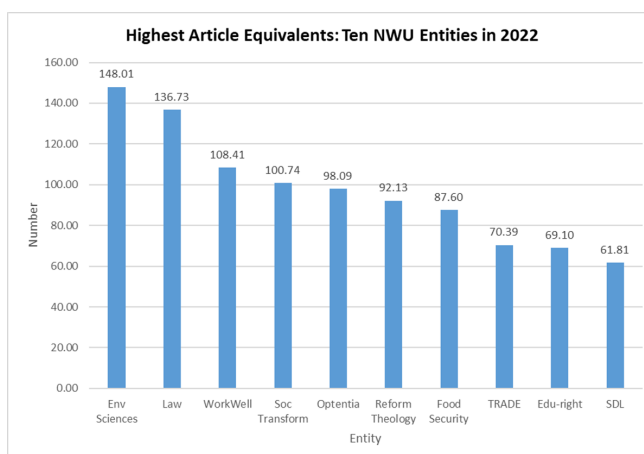
- **Scientific Quality.** The research quality of Optentia equates to levels of national excellence in virtually all sub-areas of activity, with evidence of international excellence in some areas.
- **Scientific Productivity.** The productivity of Optentia is exceptional compared to similar research entities within the higher education context.
- **Relevance.** The relevance of the research in Optentia is manifest within South Africa,

Africa and internationally, which is underlined by the distinct research contributions and impacts that are made.

- **Management.** The entity is professionally well-managed, under capable and competent leadership with a healthy balance sheet and fit for purpose to meet the

challenging and changing circumstances that lie ahead.

- **Viability.** The viability of Optentia in the long term appears to be secure. The highly qualified and dedicated staff continue to attract master's and doctoral students and a sought-after collaborator, factors that contribute to its long-term viability.



The NWU's highest-producing research entities in 2022

Strategies to Develop Optentia

During 2023, Optentia implemented various new strategies, for example:

- Building networks with other universities in South Africa.
- Double the efforts to apply for research funding.
- Support staff members to complete their PhDs.

Optentia made significant progress in implementing strategies that we identified in January 2023. Watch the new Optentia video [here](#).

Following the external evaluation of Optentia in August 2023, new strategies were discussed and implemented:

- Optentia are using their short learning programmes and short courses as a strength to develop a paradigm shift of getting North-West University staff in the mindset of trans-disciplinary work, to break silos and to limit/improve cross-faculty frustrations.
- Systems are developed to support researchers in terms of international funding attraction, external stakeholder relations and real-time tracking of research quality and output.
- To optimise its long-term viability, Optentia is working on interventions to ensure that emerging researchers share the same enthusiasm to drive future programmes in the research entity.
- Various interventions are planned to build knowledge and skills in artificial intelligence and ethical aspects regarding the use of CHATGPT in teaching and learning, and research.



Optentia Indaba: A training facility



Optentia participants meeting with GP van Rheede van Oudshoorn (Coppertop Consulting) and Juanita Greyling (Feisty Communications) to plan a marketing strategy for the Optentia Research Unit

“Systems are developed to support researchers in terms of international funding attraction.”



- To reduce misunderstandings, changes were made in the names of Optentia's [research programmes](#).
- During a session in November 2023, Optentia planned a revised communication strategy.

Before Diving Into Academic Mentorship, Try These Short Courses

“Two short courses are now available at the North-West University to prepare mentees and mentors for their roles.”

In 2021, North-West University (NWU) researchers embarked on a journey to create Short Courses in Academic Mentoring. Two considerations played a role in our decision to develop Online Short Course for Mentors and Mentees: First, an urgent need exists to develop the next generation of academics in South Africa. The quest for relevance and accountability of higher education institutions, transformation demands, and a lack of resources and capabilities present various challenges. Second, the changing values in society necessitates that a new generation of academic citizens be developed. We acknowledged that the online version of the Short Course in Academic Mentoring could play a vital role in building the capabilities of participants who cannot attend in-person workshops.

Two short courses are now available at the North-West University to prepare mentees and mentors for their roles. The aim of the Online Short Courses are to build the capabilities of researchers. Capabilities have three components, namely, values, enablement, and efficacy. Through the online Short Courses, we aim to develop mentors and mentees who value mentorship, enable them to develop their competencies and build their efficacy. Click [here](#) to read more. Watch a [video](#) about the launch of academic mentorship short courses on [YouTube](#). You can watch a video about the development of the two short courses, namely Being a Successful Mentor and Being a Successful Academic Mentee [here](#). Please contact [Lynn Booysen](#) for more information.



Prof. Ian Rothmann, Anjonet Jordaan, Kele Ramagaga, Keitumetse Moagi and Dr. Neil Barnard



The team involved with the launch of the academic mentorship short courses



Access to the Short Courses for Academic Mentors and Mentees;

1. Go to www.optentia.co.za
2. Click on Education
3. Select Registered Short courses
4. Find the Short Courses for Mentors and Mentees
5. Register for the short course of your choice
6. Click on Glide: Scan to access the course (to obtain a password: ynn.booysen@nwu.ac.za)

Introducing Prof. Sufen Chen

Sufen Chen is chair professor and provost at the National Taiwan University of Science and Technology (NTUST), Taiwan, and an extraordinary professor in the Optentia Research Unit at North-West University. Sufen grew up in Taiwan with poor educational resources. She did not have the opportunity to attend preschool. When her parents moved to the city, she could not speak English until after she attended Cram school in Grade 7. She completed Grades 10 to 12 in a girls' school. Sufen completed a bachelor's and a master's degree in Science at National Taiwan University. After working at universities in Taiwan, she got an opportunity to study for a PhD in Science Education at Indiana University-Bloomington (in the USA). Sufen joined NTUST in 2005 and was later appointed Chair of the Graduate School of Digital Learning and Education. A total of 60 PhD students, many of them international, are now studying in her department. The department is productive, maintains high standards, and has solid global networks. She was the 2021-22 Stanford-Taiwan Social Science Fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, Stanford University. Prof. Sufen's research interests are science education, technology-enhanced learning, metacognition, achievement emotions, and social media. She has been actively involved in several international projects with researchers from South Africa, India, Finland, Thailand, and the USA, from which she continuously gains momentum, curiosity, a sense of self-fulfilment, and a broader perspective for research. She is heading the Empower Vocational



Prof. Sufen Chen

Education Research Center (EVERC) at NTUST. She is increasingly involved in the bigger role of education for social stability and security. She points out that Taiwan does not have rich natural resources but has good human resources. She says that political factors, rather than money and skills, threaten sustainable development and equal and solidaristic societies. Therefore, she considers it critical to prepare people to deal with sustainable development and to create equal and

solidaristic societies. Sufen is married to Caleb Liang, a philosophy professor at the National Taiwan University.

"She says that political factors, rather than money and skills, threaten sustainable development and equal and solidaristic societies."



Prof. Sufen Chen, Prof. Ian Rothmann and Prof. Caleb Liang

Optentia's Research Indaba in Cape Town

The Optentia Research Unit in collaboration with the Department of Methodology and Statistics at Utrecht University will host a research indaba in Cape Town from 12-14 December 2023.

Various experts will participate in the research indaba. Olya Kudina, an Assistant Professor in Ethics/Philosophy of Technology will explore the dynamic interaction between values and technologies. She combines the phenomenological and pragmatist focus with cultural sensitivity to study morality as an evolving system. Her expertise in empirical philosophy helps Olya to connect ethics and design in fostering responsible human-AI collaborations, with a recent focus on AI in (mental) healthcare. Olya holds a PhD degree in Philosophy of Technology from the University of Twente.

In her talk, "ChatGPT in education: ethical considerations", Olya will discuss the ethical aspects of integrating dialogue-based Large Language Models (LLMs), such as ChatGPT, BARD or Llama in education. She will provide some technical background on the workings of LLMs, analysed some current cases of applying dialogue-based LLMs in education, specifically with regard to the anticipated benefits of learning scaffolding, and diversity and inclusion. She will then explore several ethical considerations regarding LLMs, such as the moral perception of intelligence, the risk of misinformation, and the sustainability concerns regarding these technologies. She will conclude by outlining a range of options in educational institutions regarding the possible integration of LLMs in pedagogical practices and outline

"Olya will discuss the ethical aspects of integrating dialogue-based Large Language Models."



Day 1 – 12 December 2023		
Time	Topic	Presenter/Facilitator
16:00	Capability challenges for academics: An intergenerational perspective	Prof. Ian Rothmann
Day 2 – 13 December 2023		
08:30	Coffee/Tea	
09:00	Opening	Prof. Rens van de Schoot and Prof. Ian Rothmann
09:10	AI and where it can go	Jelle Teijema, Utrecht University
09:50	Using AI in research	Prof. Japie Greeff, North-West University
10:30	Discussion	Facilitator: Prof. Rens van de Schoot, Utrecht University
11:00	Refreshments	
11:30	ChatGPT in education: ethical considerations	Prof. Olya Kudina, Delft University of Technology
12:30	Discussion: Ethics of AI	Facilitator: Dr Lance Bunt, North-West University
13:00	Lunch	
14:00	AS Review	Prof. Rens van de Schoot, Utrecht University
15:00	Discussion	Facilitator: Jelle Teijema, Utrecht University
15:30	Refreshments	
16:00	The use and development of open-source software/open educational resources	Prof. Duco Veen, Utrecht University
Day 2: 14 December 2023		
08:00	Coffee/Tea	
08:30	Open agenda discussion: How do we develop research capabilities?	Facilitator: Prof. Duco Veen
09:30	Breaking barriers: Open science strategies in intervention research addressing mental health in SMEs and public workplaces amidst precarity	Prof. Leonil van der Vaart, Norwegian University of Science and Technology
10:10	Discussion	Prof. Ruan Kruger, North-West University
10:30	Refreshments	
11:00	Free online resources for Mplus coding in bifactor exploratory structural equation modeling: Modelling and invariance testing	Prof. Leon de Beer, Norwegian University of Science and Technology
11:40	Discussion	Facilitator: Prof. Ian Rothmann, North-West University
12:00	Summary and Closure	Prof. Duco Veen, Prof. Ian Rothmann
13:00	Lunch	



Prof. Olya Kudina



Prof. Rens van de Schoot

certain conditions of institutional responsibility in this regard. Together, this will allow her to present dialogue-based LLMs, such as ChatGPT not just as a neutral instrument (e.g. "Google+" metaphor) or as a determining force (e.g. "destroying academic integrity" narrative), but as a complex sociotechnical system that in interaction with the users helps

to shape certain learning capabilities and educational values. Only considered from this complex perspective will both learners and educators be able to find a pragmatic and responsible fit for LLMs in their context-dependent practices.

See the programme above for other activities during the research indaba.

Career Development for Sustainable Employability

Prof. Ian Rothmann, Dr Neil Barnard and Anjonet Jordaan recently visited Mr Letshego Mokeki, Director of Career Development Services (CDS) at the Department of Higher Education and Training. Optentia participants discussed research collaboration with CDS. The directorate's mandate is: a) To improve the quality of life of all citizens and free the potential of each person; b) Create an environment for each individual to embrace and fulfil their potential; c) To promote equity in life chances. The CDS created the Khetha programme to facilitate informed career and study decisions. The initiatives of the CDS are impressive.



Anjonet Jordaan, Dr Neil Barnard, Prof. Ian Rothmann and Mr Letshego Mokeki

Click [here](#) to access the website of Career Development Services (Department of Higher Education and Training). You can visit the National Career Advice Portal [here](#).

Capability Development is Key to Sustainable Employability

Imagine an hourglass and think of one of the countless impoverished communities in South Africa. Ask yourself: How do we enrich the lives of the people in these communities and equip them with the skills to secure sustainable employment opportunities? If you fill the hourglass with resources and turn it over, these resources will trickle down steadily, but leave few lasting effects for the community. Therefore, the question remains unanswered. According to director of the Optentia research unit at the North-West University (NWU), the sand in that hourglass should be a focus on capability development rather than resources. "Our research shows that work capabilities are essential for sustainable employability. Sustainable employability means that workers can achieve tangible opportunities by acquiring a set of capabilities.

Also, they enjoy the conditions that enable them to make a valuable contribution through their work now and in the future, while safeguarding their health and well-being," explains Prof Rothmann. "A capability-centric approach is more effective than a resource-centric approach because it focuses on what people are able to do and be, rather than simply the resources they have. Resources only have value because of what individuals can be and do by using and converting

such resources into valuable outcomes. Therefore, equity in capabilities is more important than equality in resources." Click [here](#) to read more.

Prof. Rothmann has recently been elected as a member of the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf). ASSAf was formed in 1996 and represents South Africa in the international community of science academies. Click [here](#) to read more.



Prof. Ian Rothmann

"The directorate's mandate is to improve the quality of life of all citizens and free the potential of each person ..."

Vocational Education and Sustainable Living

Prof. Ian Rothmann recently presented a paper on sustainable employability at a conference organised by the Empower Research Centre, National Taiwan University of Science and Technology. The theme of the conference was: 'Digital Transformation of Vocational Education for a Sustainable Society'. The conference took place over four days. The first three days invited scholars from various fields, and the topics included Adaptive eLearning, Educational Robotics, STEM and Entrepreneurship, Sustainable Employability, Innovation for New Education, and Metaverse Counseling. During the event, attendees were not only able to learn from the scholars and experts, but also gained a wealth of experience by brainstorming and stimulating ideas with the many participants through the questions prepared by the experts and scholars via round table discussions. One of

"During the event, attendees were not only able to learn from the scholars and experts, but also gained a wealth of experience ..."



Prof. Sufen Chen opening the conference

the highlights of the conference is the student competition held on the fourth day of the event on December 1, where students are encouraged to come up with innovative solutions to the development and needs of technical and vocational education. During

the competition, students could express their creativity, learn from others' solutions, expand their horizons, and develop their professional skills.

Visit to the Empower Vocational Research Centre in Taiwan

Prof. Ian Rothmann visited the Empower Vocational Research Centre at the National Taiwan University of Science and Technology in Taiwan during the last week of November 2023. He learned about exciting research projects from colleagues representing various disciplinary backgrounds.

Prof. [Sufen Chen](#) started the Centre after receiving funding from the Taiwan Government. We could learn from the Empower Vocational Research Centre, especially in terms of their human resource development strategy.



Prof. Ian Rothmann and Prof. Sufen Chen

Vocational Education, Capabilities and Functionings

Prof. Ian Rothmann presented a paper the role of capabilities in sustainable development at a conference in Taiwan. He argued that various work capabilities (i.e., valued aspects of work that are enabled and can be achieved) are essential for sustainable employability: a) using knowledge and skills; b) developing knowledge and skills; c) involvement in important decisions; d) building and maintaining meaningful contacts at work; e) setting own goals; f) earning a good income, and g) contributing to something valuable. Furthermore, capability sets, rather than individual capabilities, are most influential in impacting the functioning of people.

Prof. Rothmann highlighted the following considerations regarding vocational education and capabilities:

- Development is about human flourishing. Individual income and national economic development are means to this greater end.
- The core of capability notion is that individuals can identify their 'valued beings and doings' through reasoning, which in turn is facilitated by education.
- Questions should be asked regarding the ways in which educational institutions are successful or not in supporting the achievement of human flourishing.
- Vocational education and training should enable individual and communal striving towards human flourishing.
- The capability approach places people's voices at its centre and seeks to listen carefully to their stories, their



Prof. Ian Rothmann

hopes for and experiences of vocational education and training; and aspirations for their future lives (a bottom-up approach).

- If vocational education and training is truly about preparation for work in terms of both skills and socialisation, then it must also be about the complex realities and possibilities of work.
- Attention to what individuals' value and why they participate in vocational education and training are essential.

Individuals, organisations, and policymakers can use research findings about work capabilities to deal with complex challenges: Individuals can identify their work capabilities and develop strategies for enhancing their capabilities and functioning. Organisations can create work environments that promote and support employee capabilities and functioning. Policymakers can develop

policies that promote sustainable employability, well-being and productivity of individuals and communities. Benefits of developing work capability sets include increased adaptability, higher productivity, greater job satisfaction and engagement, and reduced turnover. Overall, a focus on creating work capabilities is essential for sustainable employability because it enables people to adapt to and thrive in a changing world of work. It also benefits individuals, organisations, and the economy.

Prof. Rothmann concluded that: a) Individuals and institutions must engage in capability development: values, enablement, and achievement), b) Facilitate individuals' development by focusing on assumptions. c) Focus on valuable job resources and conversion factors. d) Track the functioning of people, e.g. flourishing, languishing, burnout, productivity.

"Development is about human flourishing."

Valedictory Address: Prof. Hans De Witte

Prof. Ian Rothmann, Prof. Leoni van der Vaart, Prof. Marise Born and Prof. Lara Roll (all extraordinary professors in Optentia) recently attended the valedictory address of Prof. Hans De Witte (an extraordinary professor in Optentia) at KU Leuven in Belgium. Various of Prof. De Witte's previous PhD candidates attended the function at KU Leuven in Belgium.



Prof. Hans De Witte and some of his previous PhD students

Visit to Tilburg University

"Topics that will be addressed include open science, AS Review, and the use of artificial intelligence."

Prof. Ian Rothmann recently visited Tilburg University in the Netherlands. He had discussions about research collaboration and research funding with Prof. Ivana Franjes and Mrs Petra Bergsma. We hope that at least one staff member of the North-West University and one master's student will benefit financially from the collaboration with Tilburg University.



Prof. Ivana Franjes, Prof. Ian Rothmann and Mrs Petra Bergsma

Visit to Utrecht University

Prof. Ian Rothmann recently visited researchers at the Department of Methodology and Statistics at Utrecht University. An outcome of the meeting was that Prof. Rens van de Schoot and Prof. Duco Veen offered support with competency development in Optentia. More specifically, a research indaba will take place in Cape Town on 13-14 December 2023. Topics that will be addressed include open science, AS Review, and the use of artificial intelligence in teaching and learning and research.



Jelle Teijema, Prof. Rens van de Schoot, Prof. Ian Rothmann, Prof. Duco Veen and Dr Beth Grandfield

Is Life Getting Worse? *by* Prof. Ruut Veenhoven

Is life getting worse as all the bad news in public media suggest? I assessed changes in average happiness in nations over the last decade. Happiness was conceptualized as the subjective enjoyment of one's life-as-a-whole, which can be measured using self-reports.

I took stock of responses to questions on happiness in representative surveys of the general population in nations, drawing on findings gathered in the World Database of Happiness. I limited to time series that cover at least 20 years and 10 data-points, which yields 200 time series in 50 nations over the years 1946-2021. I focused on change up to and including 2019, that is before the onset of the COVID 19 pandemic in the year 2020.

Average happiness rose significantly in 26 nations and declined in 11 nations: so twice more rise than decline. The aver-



Prof. Ruut Veenhoven

age size of rise and decline was similar. No significant change in average happiness took place in 35 nations.

These findings go against the widely held belief that life is getting worse contemporary societies. Firsthand knowledge about one's own happiness differs from hearsay about decline of quality of life in the country.

More detail and explanations for

the difference between facts and views is available [here](#).

"Average happiness rose significantly in 26 nations and declined in 11 nations."



Positive Organisational Psychology 2.0 by Prof. L. van Zyl

"Positive organisational psychology needs a reboot to stay relevant."

Positive organisational psychology research has stagnated. But by embracing new technologies, it can evolve to help individuals and organizations thrive. In our new paper, we propose an evolution of the positive psychology at work which we called "Positive Organisational Psychology 2.0 (POP 2.0)". This next wave of research and practice aims to help people and organisations navigate the challenges of the new world of work through embracing emerging technologies and -design to cultivate individual and organizational well-being. But what does the next wave of research and practice entail? And how will this new, tech and data driven approach to optimizing performance and wellbeing lead to new understandings of flourishing at work?

What is Positive Organisational Psychology?

Positive organizational psychology focuses on the positive aspects of workplaces that allow individuals and organizations to thrive. It aims to understand and cultivate the positive states, traits, behaviours and organisational dynamics required to optimize human potential, enhance wellbeing, and increase individual/team/organisational performance.

The field exploded in popularity in the early 2000s as companies realised happiness boosts profits. But scientific progress has stalled due to the changing work landscape, competition from related fields (like HR), failure to embrace new technologies, constantly producing repetitive findings, lack of evidence for its claims, and an overemphasis on the individual, rather than the institutional aspects of performance and wellbeing. Traditional positive organisational psychology models and approaches do not seem applicable to nor able to address the current challenges organisations face as its failing to adapt to the rapidly changing nature of work. Positive organisational psychology therefore needs

a reboot to stay relevant.

Embracing the Possibilities of POP 2.0

To address these challenges, we proposed POP 2.0 as the next wave of positive psychology at work that integrates technology and design to help organizations and people thrive. It takes an evidence-based, data-driven approach to understand and enhance human wellbeing and performance at work. POP 2.0 rapidly adopts emerging technologies like generative AI as well as human-centered design to create positive physical, digital, and cultural work environments that support wellbeing, collaboration, positive leadership, relationships, sustainability, and societal health. It develops culturally sensitive solutions that draw on local traditions and embraces the unique strengths of diversity. It employs advanced analytics to provide data-driven insights about optimal human functioning and organizational performance. It also embraces multi-disciplinary collaboration and actively partners with stakeholders at all levels (practitioners, regulators, community agents, professional societies etc) to help generate solutions to real world organisational problems.

In essence, it represents an evolution of the field to leverage emerging technologies and cross functional collaboration to help understand how organisations can thrive. POP 2.0 has several defining features:

- Adopts a systems view of organisational functioning that recognizes the intricate relationship between individuals, teams, organizations, and society.
- Emphasizes inter-and cross-disciplinary collaboration.
- Leverages data analytics and -modeling to derive organizational insights.
- Develops and integrates emerging technologies to understand, predict and facilitate well-being.



Prof. Llewellyn van Zyl

- Designs positive physical, virtual, and meta work environments.
- Develops and employs artificial assistants and bots to enhance team collaboration.
- Develops strategies for effective human-robot collaboration.
- Monitors engagement and wellbeing through real-time, passive assessments.
- Advocates for sustainable business practices that balance wellbeing and ecology.
- Actively values diversity, equity, inclusion and empowering marginalized groups.
- Actively engages multiple stakeholders to creatively address real world challenges.

By evolving thoughtfully, emphasizing ethics and experience, POP 2.0 can unlock human potential at work in exciting new ways. The opportunities are plentiful if we can thoughtfully evolve with technology while staying grounded in its humanistic roots whilst actively attempting to address real-world organisational challenges.

Reference:

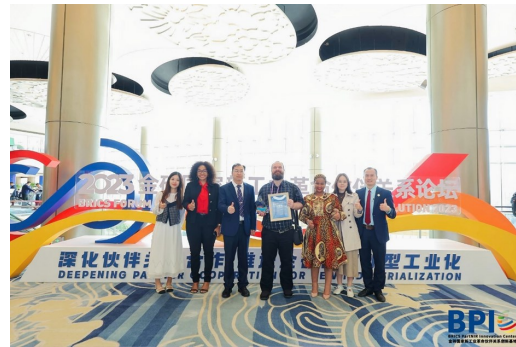
Van Zyl, L. E., Dik, B. J., Donaldson, S. I., Klibert, J. J., Di Blasi, Z., Van Wingerden, J., & Salanova, M. (2023). Positive organisational psychology 2.0: Embracing the technological revolution. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 1-13.

Prof. Japie Greeff and Students Won in China

In November 2023, Prof. Japie Greeff travelled to China with four students to participate in a number of competitions and to visit a number of companies, colleges and universities. Prof. Greeff and the students won various prizes:

- For the BRICS international finals for Data Analysis and Visualisation, Herman Le Roux won a silver medal, Jacqui Muller won a bronze medal, Prof. Greeff won an excellent coach certificate, and North-West University won an overall university medal.
- For the BRICS international finals for Big Data and Machine Learning, Jacqui Muller won a Bronze medal and Prof. Greeff won an excellent coach certificate.
- For the finals of the BRICS Industrial Innovation Awards, Prof. Greeff won a second place trophy out of 1,346 submissions across three tracks.

Prof. Greeff also gave presentations at both of the seminars linked to the first two competitions, as well as at the inaugural meetings of the BRICS professional body for Big Data and Artificial Intelligence Skills, and the professional body for Engineering Construction Skills. He was elected as a council member of the Big Data and Artificial Intelligence Professional Working Committee of the International Alliance of Skills Development at the inaugural meeting of this body.



"Prof. Greeff was elected as a council member of the Big Data and Artificial Intelligence Professional Working Committee of the International Alliance of Skills Development."

Visit to the International Longevity Centre in Singapore

In June/July 2023, Prof. Jaco Hoffman and Prof. Vera Roos visited the International Longevity Centre (ILC) in Singapore as members of ILC South Africa. The visit aimed to share common themes around socio-gerontology and to learn from examples in Singapore to establish a community for successful ageing. Winsy Togelang and Preeti introduced us to some of the older women at the Whampoa community centre, who under the leadership of Wendy Khon prepared a variety of local dishes. Prof Vera Roos accepted the challenge to play Rummikub with the ladies who proved to be formidable at their game.

We met Prof. Angelique Chan from the National University of Singapore Centre for Ageing Research and Education, Duke-NUS Medical School. This was an exploratory meeting that will be further explored in terms of research on Long-Term Care systems in the Global North and the Global South.

Prof. Leng Leng Thang from the National University of Singapore shared insights concerning the development of sustainable inter-generational programmes, and we discussed the possibility of collaborative training of carers with Prof. Helen Ko from the Singapore University of Social Sciences.

"Prof. Jaco Hoffman and Prof. Vera Roos visited the International Longevity Centre."



Paul Ong, Madame Mary Ann Tsao, Prof. Vera Roos, Preeti, Wasnik and Prof. Jaco Hoffman



Winsy Togelang, Wendy, Prof. Jaco Hoffman, and Preeti Wasnik



Prof. Jaco Hoffman, Prof. Helen Ko and Prof. Vera Roos



Prof. Leng Leng Thang

Prof. Caroll Hermann Joined Optentia

Prof Caroll Hermann recently joined the Strengths-based Studies and Interventions programme of Optentia as a researcher. Caroll Dewar Hermann holds the position of Associate Professor in the Department of Psychology at the Mafikeng campus. In 2014, she successfully defended her doctoral thesis titled "Integral eco-psychological investigation of bonsai principals, meaning, and healing". Caroll has published numerous articles in peer-reviewed journals, focusing on the therapeutic application of bonsai, as well as presented at several conventions internationally. She is an avid advocate for the psychological benefits of practicing bonsai, frequently delivering talks at bonsai and social events nationwide.

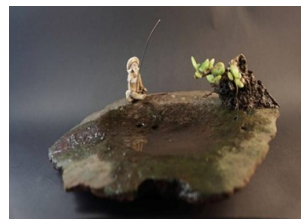
Beyond academia, Dr Hermann initiated a self-sustainable bonsai project in 2019, aimed at empowering adolescents in Northern KwaZulu Natal. Despite an early conclusion due to the onset of COVID-19, the partici-



Prof. Caroll Hermann

pants continued honing their skills, selling their creations at a dedicated stall two years later.

In her leisure time, she collects interesting and meaningful rocks, which is also a Japanese practice called *suiseki* and tends to her koi pond in her Zen garden back home in Zululand.



"She is an avid advocate for the psychological benefits of practicing bonsai."

Bianca Arendse Defended her PhD Research Proposal

One of the transformation goals of South African Higher Education (HE) institutions is to develop researchers and intellectuals who have been underrepresented in academia and who are historically marginalised. The Department of Higher Education and Training initiated the New Generation of Academics Programme to address issues of diversity and inclusion within HE. However, studies have found that HE institutions might adhere to legislative frameworks due to compliance rather than reconstructing institutional cultures, which might affect the subjective well-being of black emerging academics. Bianca Arendse will address the

following research gaps in her PhD study: Firstly, it is unclear how the subjective well-being of emerging academics manifests and how it is associated with contextual factors in HE institutions. Secondly, while work capabilities of emerging academics have been studied in various occupations and contexts, scientific information is needed regarding the work values of emerging academics in HE institutions. Thirdly, a gap exists in knowledge about the capability sets and how they relate to the functioning of emerging academics in HE institutions. Lastly, scientific information is needed regarding the effects of gender, race, and contex-



Bianca Arendse

tual factors on the capabilities and functioning of emerging academics in HE institutions. The title of her thesis at the University of Cape Town is: "Baptism by fire": Capabilities and functionings of emerging academics in South Africa. Prof. Ian Rothmann is the promoter of the study.

IFA 17th Global Conference

Prof. Jaco Hoffman and Prof. Vera attended the IFA Global Conference "Challenge, Transformation, Change" in Bangkok, Thailand (June 27-30 June 2023). This conference was a convening space for delegates from over 60 countries to share knowledge, debate issues and further policies that improve the quality of life of older people around the world through five key themes – digital technologies, older women, maintaining and improving function, immunization, and age-friendly environments.

The IFA 16th Global Conference on Ageing was set against the backdrop of important international agendas on population ageing and health, including the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing, the UN Decade of Healthy Ageing (2021-2030), as well as the Immunisation Agenda 2030, that all align and intersect with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The conference provided a platform for interaction between researchers, policy makers, and practitioners. To this end, cutting edge research presented, had a translational component, always mindful of the value for practice and policy.

Prof. Vera Roos visited a rehabilitation centre for older adults in Bangkok with its operationalization based on a medical model of care. Prof. Jaco Hoffman contextualized ageing in sub-Saharan Africa with a focus on priorities and action plans for the development of LTC systems.

The IFA conference was used as a platform to introduce and create awareness of the Implementation of the African Union Policy Framework and Plan of

"The IFA conference was used as a platform to introduce and create awareness of the Implementation of the African Union Policy Framework and Plan of Action on Ageing."



Prof. Jaco Hoffman presents a session on ICT and older persons



Dr Ad von Berlo (CEO and R&D manager at Smart Homes), Prof Vera Roos, Kevin G Orr (Group Vice President Winner Medical) on a visit to a rehabilitation centre in Bangkok



Prof. Jaco Hoffman presents a keynote on priorities and Action Plans for the development of global long-term care systems

Action on Ageing. This Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Older Persons in Africa was presented and knowledge gained could be used to align research and to contextualise the focus of a specific research topic.

IFA 17th Global Conference in South Africa

At the 16th IFA conference it was announced that ILC South Africa in collaboration with the North-West University and Optentia Research Unit will be hosting the next IFA conference in 2025 in Cape Town.



Dr Jane Barratt, Secretary General of the IFA, announces the 17th Global IFA Conference in South Africa with the IFA Board of Directors on the stage

Family Care of Older Persons in Southern Africa

Prof. Jaco Hoffman and Prof. Norah Keating attended a two-day workshop on care of older persons in southern Africa, hosted by Prof. Elena Moore, University of Cape Town.

Prof. Moore and her team presented their findings on the first phase of their programme which is focussed on costs of care to older persons and family carers. Topics included funding of long term care services; state pensions and their distribution in households of older persons needing care and care costs in rural areas. Prof. Hoffman presented his work on the care economy with emphasis on creating decent care-work jobs for unemployed young people. Norah Keating discussed her work on the care economy which encompasses the work of both paid and unpaid carers, arguing the need for decent work for both groups of carers. The session was interesting and productive with many points of connection identified. Prof. Keatings said: "While unpaid caregivers and paid care workers are essential to any country's



In front: Prof. Elena Moore (UCT) and Prof. Norah Keating (Extraordinary professor, Optentia); Middle: Prof. Jaco Hoffman with a selection of UCT students; Back: Prof Jeremy Seekings (UCT) and Ms Femada Shamam (MA candidate at Optentia, NWU)

economy and to the well-being of all those in need of care, their work is often invisible, underpaid, and devalued. It is important to understand and recognize the

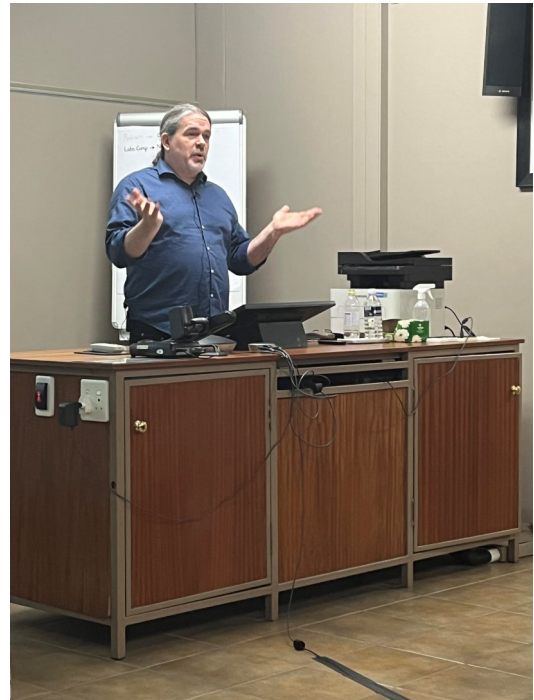
care economy's contribution to the economy and how it affects individuals in society."

"It is important to understand and recognize the care economy's contribution to the economy and how it affects individuals in society."

Presentation on Bifactor-ESEM: Prof. Alexandre Morin

Optentia hosted a top international scientist, Prof Alexandre Morin, on 29 May 2023. Prof Morin presented a hybrid workshop on structural equation modelling, targeted at academics and master's and PhD students who use quantitative data-analysis techniques to study the validity of models.

During the workshop, Prof Morin introduced a sophisticated framework – the bifactor-exploratory structural equation modelling framework – which allows researchers to test the validity of models for multiple groups in multicultural or cross-cultural environments in cross-sectional and longitudinal studies. Click [here](#) to read more.



Prof. Alexandre Morin

“Climate change has an impact on the social and environmental determinants of health..”

Picturing the Climate Crisis: Meet Prof. Eugene Davids

Prof. Eugene Davids recently visited Optentia and presented a paper ‘Picturing the climate crisis: The perceptions of climate change on health and well-being of emerging adults using photovoice’. Climate change has an impact on the social and environmental determinants of health. It is estimated that the ripple effect of climate change on health and well-being will increase morbidity and mortality rates between 2030 and 2050. Many developing countries, like South Africa, would have great difficulty coping with the impact of climate change. In South Africa, emerging adults account for more than 36% of the population. This group of young people will be facing the

impact of climate change on their health and well-being. The current study aimed to understand emerging adults’ perceptions about climate change’s role in shaping their health and well-being. The sample of emerging adults was purposively sampled at a private higher education institution in South Africa. The data were gathered through an innovative participatory method, photovoice, where conversations about the photographs informed the perceived role climate change plays in emerging adults’ health and well-being using the SHOWeD method. The results illustrated both the lived experiences and perceptions of climate change’s role in the health and



Prof. Eugene Davids

well-being of emerging adults. Click [here](#) to watch a YouTube interview with Prof. Davids.

Projects on Inclusion and Decolonial Praxis

Optentia's Inclusion and Decolonial Praxis has embarked on several projects in 2023. Among them is an umbrella research project titled *The African Idea as Method*. This umbrella project seeks to conceptualise Africa as a theoretical category and a prism to examine itself and the contemporary world. This umbrella project is a strategic anthropomorphising initiative that aims to drive inquiry that de-links from diagnostic epistemologies via many avenues ranging from film, academic citizenship, community engagement and book projects. In 2023, its first project was the Sweden/South Africa collaboration. Prof Ngwenya visited the Department of Health, Blekinge Institute of Technology, Sweden. The purpose of the visit was to work on collaborative research under the project of *The African Idea as Method*. During his visit in July, an interview study was set up on diversity, equity, and inclusion in nursing education from lecturers' and students' experiences. The research which will be conducted in Jan/Feb 2024. A scoping paper was also submitted to 'Nursing Today' for review. Prof. Ngwenya also introduced the topic of Decoloniality and Health through lectures at Blekinge University. The project has also opened some more avenues for collaborative research. Optentia is now part of the eNursEd study. In 2024 a new round of data collection will be done including Swedish Universities and also with Universities in Norway, Poland and Spain. A co-written book proposal and two chapters have been submitted to Routledge under the title; *Media Alter-nativism and the Fourth Industrial*



Prof. Blessed Ngwenya



Prof. Blessed Ngwenya in Sweden

"This umbrella project seeks to conceptualise Africa as a theoretical category and a prism to examine itself and the contemporary world. ..."

Revolution: Re-framing inclusivity for development in South Africa. In October 2023, Ngwenya attended the 3rd International Conference on Education Quality Transformational Leadership in Education at Ibn Zohr University, Agadir, Morocco that was hosted by Horizon Europe. As part of the

African Idea as Method themes, Ngwenya was invited to deliver a Keynote speech entitled *Performativity, Inclusion and Shaping the Knowledge Society in the 21st Century: A Decolonial Turn*.

Visit to South Africa: Prof. Marianne vanWoerkom

Prof. Marianne van Woerkom, a professor of positive psychology and human resource studies at Tilburg University in the Netherlands and renowned expert on strengths use, was invited to visit Optentia in October this year.

She presented an insightful public lecture on the topic "Strengths use at work" which was well attended both in-person and online, including by members from other universities locally and abroad, and by members from the private sector. A strengths-based approach is interested in identifying and employing employees' strengths so that they are able to do what they do best and in this way be more engaged in their work, productive, and loyal to their organisations. Her lecture demonstrated the advantages of identifying and harnessing employees' strengths to promote coping with work pressure and to unlock superior performance as compared to counterparts who only focused on deficit correction instead. She also outlined talent management strategies and human resource practices that could support strengths use and the personal- and professional development of all employees across the spectrum. Employees who are allowed to adjust their jobs according to their strengths are, in short, more likely to flourish.

Prof Van Woerkom also had several individual interviews with researchers who were interested to explore the topic of strengths use further, and she presented additional tailor-made lectures on strengths use to various target groups and across campuses in the Faculties of Economic and Management Sciences and Health Sciences respectively.

"Critics of positive psychology have questioned various aspects of the discipline..."



Prof. Marita Heyns and researchers in her programme discuss strengths-based approaches with Prof. Marianne vanWoerkom



Prof. van Woerkom presented a workshop to Psychology students at the Potchefstroom Campus of the North-West University



Presentation on strengths use during the post graduate research journey to PhD students of the Centre for Excellence in Nutrition

Research in Whose Interest? *by* Prof. Andries Baart

On 16-17 November 2023, I have presented two lectures via Zoom on qualitative research to Optentia researchers, specifically on how to get from codes step by step to conceptualization and even theory formation. Not a very easy subject. It involves a lot of theoretical knowledge, technique and experience. Yet the most important thing, as it turned out, is one principle: do you really want to do justice to the data you have collected, do you really want the voice of the researched to sound? Not in the formal sense but in the substantive sense: a voice and a message that is given space, that is not isolated but understood in its context, that is not too quickly merged (and suppressed) by us as researchers mixing our own ideas through it or the voice of other researched parties. Everything revolves around the will to do maximum justice to what this (one) investigated wants to make clear, how this (one) experiences it and what he or she desires. Therefore, in the analysis of the data, we stay as long as possible at the level of $n=1$. Of course, the idea behind it is that you really want to understand what the other person has to say to you and that this understanding should be derived from the data and not from my favourite view or from what I find practically or theoretically relevant. Researched ones, if we do not speak to their data with precision and to the best of our ability, will feel that they have been robbed: scientists retrieve data, reject anything they deem irrelevant, and use the rest to their advantage. They glory with it in eminent journals, in building their careers or gaining prestige in their academic context. Both lectures - leaving all technology aside - were also an exercise in humility: who or what is it ultimately about when we do research? There are no easy answers.

On 21 November 2023, the Netherlands turned out to have made Wilders' Party for Freedom (PVV) by



far the largest in the parliamentary elections. It stunned us (and there are many millions of us) that such a large part of the population chooses a populist. Very alarming. He is far-right, wants to ban everything Islamic (e.g., mosques, Koran, and headscarf), withdraw our support to Ukraine, he wants the Netherlands to leave the EU (Nexit), immigration (including asylum seekers) must become zero, all climate measures must be abolished, Amsterdam Airport is allowed to expand, the retirement age must return to 65 (is now 67.5), subsidies on culture must be abolished, etc. The Netherlands, he says, must once again belong to the Dutch; we hear the echo of another populist. Orbán immediately congratulated him, as did Marine Le Pen, Putin and so on. His voters are mostly spoiled and neglected Dutch people who are not willing to sacrifice anything for a better or just world, who do not want to hear about solidarity. They have been seduced with a mixture of xenophobia, material promises (e.g., more income, care, and houses), with renewals (anything better than the government we have now - see also Argentina), and especially with a lot of rhetoric. Our social services are on a high standard, and it is hardly about 'poverty', all the more about populist politics, unfeasible promises, and activating discontent and anger about the 'elite'. We will learn in the coming weeks how things continue: I am very

worried. The anger that drives his voters has been studied around the world for years. One simple cause it does not have. One common thread does however exist: people feel not heard, not seen, not taken seriously. The 'elite' (we, the researchers, the politicians, scientists, wealthy people, professionals, city dwellers) do not listen, pursue its own interests and own ideas, whether right or left. That elite turns a blind eye to what 'the people' say, demand or suffer from.

We are back to both lectures and the common thread therein: taking the other person maximally seriously, really wanting to hear and not using them for your own gain. That is also what my presence theory is all about. How it turns out in the Netherlands we do not know at this moment, but for me as a researcher the result of the elections is a wake-up call: who are we really listening to? In 2023, Optentia is organising a festival on qualitative research and we will have the opportunity to explore the political-ethical question behind our research at Optentia with each other: cui bono or to whom is it a benefit? Or what price do we pay for neglecting the least, the last and the lost?

"Researched ones, if we do not speak to their data with precision and to the best of our ability, will feel that they have been robbed."

From Community Project to International Peer-reviewed Publication

Two Optentia PhD candidates, Henry Lewis and Suzette Ragadu were awarded their PhD degrees in October 2023. Dr Lewis' study focused on sustainable employability in the hotel industry in Jamaica. Dr Ragadu's study focused on decent work, capabilities and functionings of early childhood educators in South Africa. Dr Suzette Ragadu and Prof. Ian Rothmann also published an article in 'Mental Health and Social



Prof. Ian Rothmann and Dr Henry Lewis



Prof. Ian Rothmann Dr Suzette Ragadu

Inclusion' as part of a collection Click [here](#) to access the article. of article on positive psychology.

Configurational Comparative Methods by Prof. Leoni van der Vaart

"Structural analysis examines how causal factors combine to produce outcomes."

Social and behavioural phenomena are complex due to numerous interdependent causes. Quintana (2023) proposes three methodological frameworks for investigating these interactions: interaction analysis, structural analysis, and configurational analysis. Interaction analysis explores whether the effect of a variable depends on other variables, like assessing if tutoring's impact on academic performance varies with study hours. Structural analysis examines how causal factors combine to produce outcomes, such as determining if study habits, peer relationships, teacher support, and motivation jointly lead to academic success (Quintana, 2023).

Configurational analysis, an alternative to the mentioned methods, employs Configurational Comparative Methods (CCMs) like qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) and coincidence analysis (CNA). QCA and CNA differ in prioritizing sufficiency vs necessity and their approach to identifying necessary and sufficient conditions. CNA, often preferred for its redundancy-free solutions and elimination of counterfactuals, is valuable alongside QCA in

Think – methods – Again

identifying necessary and/or sufficient factors for outcomes (Swiatczak, 2022; Quintana, 2023).

Returning to the example of academic success, CCMs reveal various factor combinations contributing to high achievement. For some, effective study habits and supportive peer relationships are necessary, while quality teaching and intrinsic motivation are sufficient for others. CCMs help identify necessary and/or

sufficient factors for academic success by testing different configurations associated with positive outcomes.

In conclusion, CCMs effectively unravel complex social and behavioural patterns rooted in complexity theory, intersectionality theory, and the "heterogeneity revolution" (Quintana, 2023).



PhD for Lance Bunt

Dr Lance Bunt was awarded a PhD during a graduation ceremony in October 2023. Prof. Japie Greef was one of the promoters of the study. Lance's research interests include: Serious Game Design; Serious Game Design Stakeholders; Ludic Theory in Higher Education; Games for Learning; Game-based Learning; Instructional Technology; Social Capital; Pedagogy for Effective Learning; and Wicked Problems in Science Education



Prof. Ian Rothmann, Dr Lance Bunt and Prof. Japie Greef

PhD Submissions in Optentia

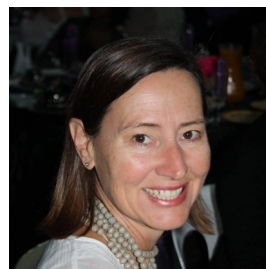
Various Optentia PhD students submitted their theses for examination on 22 November 2023.

Mari Ford's thesis focused on the compassion, self-compassion, flourishing and commitment of managers in South African organisations. Elette Horn's study investigated associations between student capability, well-being, functioning, perceived employability, and their embeddedness in, or intent to leave a higher education institution in South Africa. Kalashni Narainsamy studied the capabilities and functionings of learners in secondary schools in a sub-Saharan context from a capability approach perspective.

Andrew Banda explored support mechanisms in rural communities in Zambia for the well-being of older people. The title of Prof. Vhumani Magezi's is: 'Religion and health ambivalence gridlock: Towards optimisation of African churches as assets for adolescent and youth sexual reproductive health.



Andrew Banda



Mari Ford



Elette Horn



Kalashni Narainsamy



Vhumani Magezi

We wish all our PhD candidates well!

"Elette investigated associations between student capability, well-being, functioning, perceived employability, and embeddedness in, or intent to leave a higher education."

Sustainable Employability of Emergency Nurses

Neil Barnard, post-doctoral research fellow at Optentia Research Unit, presented a poster at the National Humanities Higher Degree Conference (NHHD 2023), between 23 October – 27 October 2023 at The Riverside Sun Hotel, Vanderbijlpark, South Africa. The poster was based on the article published in the Journal of Nursing Management earlier this year: Sustainable Employability of Emergency Nurses: The Effects of Precarious Work and Mental Toughness on Capabilities and Mental Health. Neil co-authored the article with Prof. Ian Rothmann (Optentia Research Unit, NWU), Prof Leon de Beer (Department of Psychology, Norwegian University of Science and Technology), and Prof Welma Lubbe (NuMIQ Research Focus Area, NWU).

In the article, and the poster, it was argued that emergency nursing professionals operate in a unique environment comprising traumatic events, violence, unpredictability, and numerous workplace stressors (such as shift work, high workloads, and physically demanding tasks). Within this potentially precarious work context, these professionals



Prof. Welma Lubbe and Dr. Neil Barnard

provide a crucial role in patient care and the effectiveness of the healthcare offering. Therefore, it was considered valuable to study the sustainable employability of emergency nurse by investigating the effect of precariousness at work (as an external constraint) and mental toughness (as a personal resource) on their work capabilities (enabled and achieved work values) and mental health at work.

The study results showed that the precarious work dimensions (salary, work conditions, job insecurity, and professional development) negatively predicted emergency nurses' capabilities. Significantly, precarious

work conditions and professional development were associated with most work capabilities. Emergency nurses' capability set positively affected their mental health, with mental toughness moderating the effect of poor salary (a component of precarious work) on capabilities. Precariousness regarding salary, work conditions, and professional development affected emergency nurses' mental health indirectly and negatively through a poor capability set, while mental toughness indirectly and positively affected their mental health through a strong capability set.

“... emergency nursing professionals operate in a unique environment comprising traumatic events, violence, unpredictability, and numerous workplace stressors.”



Understanding Human Intimacy Facets

The year 2023 is undoubtedly one for the books. On the bright side, the ASCHP invited me to their annual seminar where I got the opportunity to compare and discuss the value of interdisciplinary collaboration – the emphasis being on Medical Sociology and Intimacy Coaching. With the current trajectory of gender and sexuality studies, this was definitely a step in the right direction.

The importance of understanding human intimacy facets, particularly from the premise that sex is the most sacred space between two people, cannot be over emphasised. A holistic understanding, which includes the academic – Medical Sociology/Sociology – and the application side – Intimacy Coaching/body work- is a perfect starting point.



Dr Marina Basson

Research Project: Well-being in Inclusive Schools

From 8 to 9 June 2023, Prof. Susanne Schwab and Katharina organised the Erasmus+ project meeting in Vienna. This provided a chance to bring together international project partners from Luxembourg (Dr. Mireille Krischler), Portugal (Prof. Paulo C. Dias), and an external expert from Switzerland (Dr Carmen Zurbriggen). In addition, it was a great opportunity for a professional exchange with Prof. Savolainen, who travelled from Finland to attend the meeting. The time in Vienna was well used to work on the SD-WELL-AWARE project (September 2022 – August 2025). The project aims to increase teachers' awareness and skills to promote student well-being in inclusive schools. Teachers are supported to enhance their skills in assessing and promoting the well-being of their students (8-12 years). Finally, the project aims to support students who are at risk or whose well-being at school is low. Something everyone enjoyed after overcoming the challenges related to COVID-19 regulations: Participants were not only able to discuss and improve the results of their independent work or to



Prof. Susanne Schwab, Prof. Carmen Zurbriggen, Dr. Mireille Krischler. On the right: Prof. Hannu Savolainen, Prof. Paulo C. Dias and Katharina Jakob)

develop the whole project process but also to socialize and exchange new ideas at the end of a long day of personal meetings.

“The project aims to increase teachers' awareness and skills to promote student well-being in inclusive schools....”



IARU-ALH Annual Conference at the University of Tokyo 2023

The Aging, Longevity, and Health (ALH) group of the International Alliance of Research Universities (IARU) has been actively fostering co-creative research and facilitating the exchange of young researchers on aging and health issues since 2012. The 2023 IARU-ALH Annual Conference, hosted by the Institute of Gerontology (IOG) and the Institute for Future Initiatives (IFI) at The University of Tokyo, took place from October 16 to 18, 2023, at the Ito International Research Centre, The University of Tokyo.

This conference is held in rotation by member universities, aiming to foster the development of students and young researchers expected to play a key role in the field of Aging, Longevity, and Health (ALH). The conference also seeks to promote networking and collaboration on global issues related to population aging and increasing longevity, as well as to deepen cooperation on the ideal image of local communities with distinctive characteristics in each country.

Senior faculty members, students, and young researchers from various universities, including the Australian National University (ANU) – Prof Nicolas Cherbuin, National University of Singapore (NUS) – Prof Angelique Chan, Peking University – Prof Chen Gong, Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich (ETHZ) – Dr Benedikt Helgason, University of Cambridge – Prof Louise Lafortune, University of Cape Town / North-West University – Prof Jaco Hoffman, University of Copenhagen – Prof Lene Juel Rasmussen, University of Oxford – Prof Sarah Harper and University of Tokyo – Prof Katsuya



IARU Steering group meeting. From the far end of the table, right to left: Prof. Angelique Chan, NUS - Outgoing Chair; Prof. Sarah Harper, Oxford, Prof. Jaco Hoffman, NWU/UCT; hidden: Prof. Nicolas Cherbuin, ANU; Prof. Lene Juel Rasmussen, Copenhagen; Prof. Louise Lafortune, Cambridge; Prof. Chen Gong, Peking; Dr Benedikt Helgason, ETHZ; Prof. Katsuya Iijima (Incoming Chair) and Prof. Hiroko Costantini, Tokyo

Iijima and Hiroko Costantini, actively participated in face-to-face discussions. The three-day program, featuring 20 presentations, including contributions from the WINGS-GLAFS program* of the University of Tokyo, provided a unique opportunity for graduate students and Early Career Researchers to learn how science can contribute to the problems of ageing and ageing society, to exchange ideas, and to join and facilitate the international network of gerontological research.

On the first day, postgraduate students and early career researchers presented their research and findings in diverse fields, including medicine, bioengineering, biology, psychology, neuroscience, socio-economics, environmental studies, technology, and medical statistics. Participants had a valuable opportunity to learn about the latest issues in ageing and health, and gain in-

sights into how researchers and societies worldwide are addressing the challenges to achieve a healthy ageing society.

On the second day, in addition to the presentations mentioned above, a workshop focused on the conference theme, "Longevity and Well-being for a Sustainable Society and Future," was conducted. Participants were divided into five groups, engaging in lively discussions on 1) Sharing the situation in their respective countries, 2) How IKIGAI/purpose in life should be measured, and 3) How to encourage/empower IKIGAI/purpose of life in older adults.

"The conference seeks to promote networking and collaboration on global issues related to population aging and increasing longevity..."

IARU-ALH Annual Conference (continued)

On the final day of the IARU-ALH Annual Conference, participants were divided into two groups: the Steering Committee and Early Career Researchers including students. They discussed their past activities and future initiatives, and after that, all participants collectively reflected on and shared their experiences over the three days. The discussions and networks established at this conference are expected to yield valuable outcomes with a lasting impact on the field of Aging, Longevity, and Health (ALH).

* The WINGS-GLAIFS program: World-leading Innovative Graduate Study Program in Gerontology - Global Leadership Initiative for Age-Friendly Society



Closing comments by the new Chair of IARU - ALH, Prof Katsuya Iijima (Director, Institute of Gerontology, The University of Tokyo)



Dr Yanan Zhang, Oxford - Chair of Postgraduate students and Early Career Researchers Network

“The discussions and networks established at this conference are expected to yield valuable outcomes with a lasting impact on the field of Aging, Longevity, and Health.”



Group photo of IARU-ALH Steering Committee and Student and Early Career Researcher presenters showing the symbol of a full circle, well-lived lives.

Effects of Virtual Reality Training *by* Prof. Kristen Betts

Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields play a pivotal role in fostering global economic growth and innovation. However, the shortage of skilled STEM workers is a growing concern for numerous countries. According to the World Economic Forum (2023), "In the United States, one third of workers lack the digital skills needed to succeed in today's economy" (para. 1). Spatial visualization abilities (SVA) have been shown to be a potential critical factor in STEM academic achievement and student retention in postsecondary education. Researchers at Drexel University conducted a transdisciplinary study to investigate the potential effects of virtual reality (VR) to enhance learning. The study examined participant performance and mental workload using behavioural (i.e., time spent) and func-

tional near infrared spectroscopy (fNIRS) brain-imaging-technology-derived measures. Over a six-week period, 10 first-year biomedical engineering students engaged with a custom-designed spatial visualization gaming application. The study revealed important small effects of task load and changes in the spatial characteristics of the task on time spent and HbO measures from all the prefrontal cortex (PFC) areas while transfer had a large significant effect on time spent and HbO measures from the right anterior medial PFC (AMPFC). Training was found to have a moderate significant effect on time spent and HbR measures from the left AMPFC. The findings add to the literature and have important implications for VR training, research, and instructional design across all course modalities in enhancing student



learning, retention, and transfer of spatial skills in STEM disciplines.

Reference

Betts, K., Reddy, P., Galoyan, T., Delaney, B., McEachron, D. L., Izzetoglu, K., & Shewokis, P. A. (2023). An examination of the effects of virtual reality training on spatial visualization and transfer of learning. *Brain Sciences*, 13 (6), 890. <https://doi.org/10.3390/brainsci13060890>

"The findings have important implications for VR training, research, and instructional design..."

Developing Skills to Apply for Research Funding

During September 2023, Optentia participants learned more about the competencies needed to apply for research funding. The title of Lauren Gelfand's presentation was "Cracking the code: Resource mobilization for research." She encouraged participants to explore four questions about a research project: a) What will it contribute to the body of knowledge? b) What will it do for policy and decision-making? c) How can it inform best practice through context-driven scale and replication? d) What sort of skills will be transferable through the research process? Lauren stressed the importance of a theory of change that gets applicants to identify all of the what,



Prof. Mirna Nel, Cornelia Jacobs, Lauren Gelfand and Prof. Ian Rothmann

how and why that can inform how a change can occur in a specific context.

Cornelia Jacobs focused on a) Managing research operations: terms and considerations; b) Funding applications: contracting process; c) The relationship with

funders (framework, overhead costs, dealing with regulations of the university and funder); d) Budgets; e) Risks (in budget and payment terms); f) Recordkeeping and structure of electronic records, and g) Reporting.

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Books

- Carr, S.C. (2023). Woe and well-being: Towards sustainable livelihoods. Springer.
- Carr, S.C., Hopner, V., Hodgetts, D.J., & Young, M. (2023). Tackling precarious work: Towards sustainable livelihoods. Routledge.
- Cox, E., Bachkirova, T., & Clutterbuck, D. (2023). The complete handbook of coaching (4th ed.). Sage.
- Edmondson, A. (2023). Right kind of wrong: Why learning to fail can teach us to thrive. Penguin Random House.
- Graham, C. (2019). The power of hope: How the science of well-being can save us from despair. Princeton University Press.
- Grant, A. (2023). Hidden potential: The science of achieving great things. Penguin Random House.
- Maslach, C., & Leiter, M.P. (2022). The burnout challenge: Managing people's relationships with their jobs. Harvard University Press.
- Ton, Z. (2023). The case for good jobs: How great companies bring dignity, pay and meaning to everyone's work. Harvard Business Review Press.
- Tracy, S. (2020). Qualitative research methods: Gathering evidence, crafting analysis, communicating impact (2nd ed.). Wiley Blackwell.

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

Useful Websites

- <https://goodorganisations.com>
- <https://youtube.com/c/GoodOrganisations> is an informative YouTube channel
- www.refseek.com is a search engine for academic resources.
- www.worldcat.org - search the content of 20,000 global libraries.
- <https://link.springer.com> - access to more than 10 million scientific documents: books, articles,
- <http://repec.org> - Volunteers from 102 countries collected nearly 4 million publications
- www.science.gov is a U.S. government search engine.
- www.pdfdrive.com is the largest website for free download of PDF books.
- www.base-search.net is one of the most powerful search engines for academic research texts.