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**National
Research
Foundation**

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam - NRF South Africa

Desmond Tutu Doctoral Training Programme

Available PhD positions for the 2016 Call

February 2016

No	Faculty	Research area/project	VU Supervisor	SA Supervisor
1	Faculty of Theology	'Towards a theology of Forgiveness 2.0'	Prof. Dr. Eddy van der Borgh	Not specified yet
2	Faculty of Economy and Business Administration	'Local Economic Inequality in South Africa'	Prof. Dr. Chris Elbers	Prof. Murray Leibbrandt, UCT
3	Faculty of Social Sciences	'Sex on the move: mobile and migrant clients of sex workers in South Africa'	Dr Lorraine Nencel	Prof. Jo Vearey, WITS
4	Faculty of Social Sciences	'Decentralization of disaster response in South Africa: towards strengthening local resilience'	Dr. Kees Boersma, Dr. Julie Ferguson, Prof. Dr. Peter Groenewegen	Prof. Andries Jordaan, UFS
5	Faculty of Social Sciences	'Hostile media perceptions? Understanding the mass Media's role on polarization and group conflict in South Africa'	Prof. Dr. Tilo Hartmann	Prof. Kitty Dumont, UNISA
6	Faculty of Medicine	'Giving children a chance to live'	Prof. Dr. Marceline van Furth	Prof. Dr. Linda Gail-Bekker, UCT
7	Faculty of Sciences	'Energy and charge transfer processes in photosynthesis'	Prof. Dr. Rienk van Grondelle	Prof. Dr. Francesco Petruccione, UKZN
8	Faculty of Sciences	'Creating Web and Voice Services in Multiple Languages for Rural Development in Africa'	Prof. Dr. Hans Akkermans	Prof. Dr. Etienne Barnard, NWU
9	Faculty of Behavioural and Movement Sciences	'Attachment, self-concept and exploration, can they be enhanced in at-risk families with young children'	Dr. Paula Sterkenburg	Prof. van Rensburg and Dr. Spies, NWU

This document provides details of all the research projects that are available under the Vrije University Amsterdam – NRF Desmond Tutu Doctoral Training programme for 2016. As part of the application, applicants must include details of the proposed research; the identified supervisor at Vrije University Amsterdam; and the co-supervisor at the South African university.

FACULTY OF THEOLOGY

PhD-position ' Towards a theology of Forgiveness 2.0'

Background information Faculty/Department/Research group, in which the PhD student will be based

Faculty of Theology, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

The Faculty of Theology at VU University Amsterdam is an ecumenical Protestant faculty that carries out its academic activities of teaching, research and social service with regard both to Dutch society and to Christianity as it is practiced worldwide, while engaging in dialogue with other religions and creeds.

Contents of the research project

Towards a theology of Forgiveness 2.0

With the title of his *No Future without Forgiveness* (1999), the chair of the TRC, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, gave a Christian interpretation of the national reconciliation process in South Africa after the official end of the apartheid era. In that volume he defended his calls on victims to forgive their offenders during the meetings of the Human Rights Violations Committee that he chaired. Since then he has continued to promote forgiveness in personal and communal context as in his 2014 *The Book of Forgiving*, written together with his daughter Mpho. Tutu's emphasis on forgiveness has contributed to a further development of a theology of forgiveness on a scale unknown before the TRC. At the same time the way the archbishop has made reconciliation depending on forgiveness and his pressure on victims to forgive unconditionally has been met with severe criticism by social scientists, by psychologists, social scientists, theologians and biblical scholar, as illustrated recently in Maria Mayo, *The Limits of Forgiveness: Case studies in the Distortion of a Biblical Ideal* (2015). Almost 20 years after the TRC, time has come for a thick description and in depth evaluation of the

development of forgiveness as a Christian theological concept. Which new understandings of forgiveness have been retrieved or newly developed since the TRC, and how can the critical scholarship that has reacted to the use of the forgiveness discourse be made fruitful for an upgraded theology of forgiveness?

Requirements

- E.g. Master degree in Theology or Religious Studies with specialization in systematic, or practical theology,
- E.g. Proficiency in English. Knowledge of local language is a plus, but not a requirement

Information

For additional information please contact: Prof. Dr. E. Van der Borgh

Name: Prof. E. Van der Borgh

Phone number: 00 31 20 5986634

E-mail: eaig.vander.borgh@vu.nl

FACULTY OF ECONOMICS AND BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION

PhD-position 'Local Economic Inequality in South Africa'

Background information Faculty/Department/Research group, in which the PhD student will be based

Within Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (VU) the student will be based in the Department of Economics of the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, in particular the Development Economics research group within the department. The Department of Economics and the Development Research group have a very international reputation in research, especially applied microeconomics. The Department is also actively involved in teaching at the graduate and undergraduate level, and is associated with the Tinbergen Institute, the graduate school of three Dutch Universities: VU Amsterdam, University of Amsterdam, and Erasmus University Amsterdam.

Details South African supervisor:

Prof. Murray Leibbrandt (or one of his colleagues at the) School of Economics of the University of Cape

Town.

Contents of the research project

Economic Inequality constitutes a major threat to prosperous societies. Besides raising concerns of fairness inequality, especially inequality of opportunity, can also undermine the potential for societies overall growth and development. South Africa is well known for its high level of economic inequality. This project focuses on local inequality. While inequality at the national level is important, local inequality may be more relevant for an individual's social and economic opportunities. Part of the project is therefore estimation of trends in inequality at the local level, building on recent advances in small area estimation of poverty and inequality sometimes referred to as 'poverty mapping'. One of the questions we seek to answer is to what extent trends in national and local inequalities differ and which factors are associated with these trends. A further question is to study the relationship between rural development and inequality trends.

The collaboration of UCT and VU Amsterdam is an excellent environment for this research project. UCT has a world-class reputation and long standing experience of analyzing survey data. At VU Amsterdam Professors Chris Elbers and Peter Lanjouw were among the pioneers of poverty mapping methodology. The project will also benefit from an international research collaboration looking at inequality trends in the big emerging economies.

Requirements

- Master degree in economics or statistics
- Proficiency in English
- Experience with data analysis
- Affinity with microeconomic analysis
- Willingness to work hard

Information

For additional information please contact:

Name: Ms. G.E. Heemskerk

Phone number: +31 20 5986140

E-mail: g.e.heemskerk@vu.nl

Website: <http://www.feweb.vu.nl/en/departments-and-institutes/development-economics/index.aspx>

FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

PhD-position ‘Sex on the move: mobile and migrant clients of sex workers in South Africa’

Background information Faculty/Department/Research group, in which the PhD student will be based

In the Netherlands the student will be based at the Department of Sociology and in South Africa the student will be situated at the African Centre for Migration & Society (ACMS), University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. Dr. Nencel is a Research Associate at the ACMS. In South Africa the student will be supervised by Senior Researcher Dr. J. Vearey. Dr. Vearey and Dr. Nencel are in the process of joint research funded by the WOTRO, concerning the double vulnerability of sex workers in the Netherlands and South Africa. The proposed PhD project will be a satellite project of this research program. Thus, this proposed project will reinforce our already existing “bridging activities”.

Contents of the research project

South Africa is associated with historical and contemporary population movements and a high prevalence of communicable diseases – including HIV. Whilst sex work provides an important livelihood activity for some, all aspects of sex work are criminalised in South Africa, presenting multiple vulnerabilities to adults who consent to the sale of sex. This includes multiple forms of structural violence – such as barriers to healthcare, stigma, exclusion from protective policies - and direct violence from the police and clients. In the case of non-national sex workers – who may have an irregular documentation status - this also involves fear of immigration officials and potential deportation. Recent research indicates that sex work and migration trajectories are strongly interlinked, and that the majority of sex workers are working outside of their province or country of birth.

However, little is known about the movements, motivations and practices of migrant and mobile clients. Whilst the body of research on sex work in South Africa is increasing, it has – to date - focussed on the experiences of sex workers in urban contexts; very little is known or understood about the ongoing migratory trajectories of sex workers and their clients. As a result the migratory

trajectories, mobilities and behaviours of these clients – such as truck drivers, seasonal farm workers, miners, taxi drivers – remain unknown. Current responses to sex work in South Africa fail to engage with migration and mobility of both sex workers and clients. This means that programmes are oriented to relatively sedentary populations and population movement is excluded from ongoing policy discussions and the regulation of sex work. This not only has public health implications but wider impacts in relation to the protection and rights of mobile and migrant sex workers. Thus, focussing this research on mobile clients will on the one hand provide needed empirical data and on the other hand make this population more visible. This will ultimately contribute to developing ways to make clients more aware and responsible in their encounters with sex workers. The proposed topic provides an opportunity for a doctoral student to develop an innovative research project exploring the migrant and mobile clients of sex workers. Building on previous work that has engaged with involved methodologies and partnership with a sex worker-led movement, the doctoral student will be encouraged to think creatively about ways to engage with mobile and migrant clients of sex workers.

Requirements

- Master degree in Anthropology, Sociology, development studies or Public Health with specialization in gender and/or sexuality studies Proficiency in English, and preferably one or more of the following languages: isiZulu, isiXhosa, Ndebele, Shona, Swahili, Portuguese and/or French
- Experience with working with vulnerable groups as well as qualitative methods including ethnographic and participatory research methods
- Previous experience in conducting research in the sex industry
- Affinity with doing research from a sex worker rights perspective

Information

For additional information please contact:

Name: Lorraine Nencel

Phone number: +3120-5986879

E-mail: l.s.nencel@vu.nl

Dr. Jo Vearey, University of Witwatersrand

+27(0)11 717 4033

Jo.Vearey@wits.ac.za

FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

PhD-position 'Decentralization of disaster response in South Africa: towards strengthening local resilience'

Background information Faculty/Department/Research group, in which the PhD student will be based

Dr. Kees Boersma, dr. Julie Ferguson, prof. dr. Peter Groenewegen

Department of Organization Sciences
Faculty of Social Sciences, VU Amsterdam

The researchers are involved in the NWO research project *Smart Disaster Governance*. This research project aims to identify innovative and effective disaster response practices. The research aims to address the role that netcentric governance can play in improving disaster responses. Netcentric governance is defined as the organization of a response to disasters by making use of self-directed networks of heterogeneous stakeholders including inhabitants, as an alternative to top-down approaches.

Details South African supervisor:

Prof. Andries Jordaan (PhD) MMM DWD

Director: DiMTEC (Disaster Management Training and Education Centre for Africa)
Faculty / Fakulteit: Natural and Agricultural Sciences / Natuur- en Landbouwetenskappe
University of the Free State
PO Box / Posbus 339, Bloemfontein 9300
Republic of South Africa / Republiek van Suid-Afrika

Contents of the research project

After a promising start toward establishing the 'Rainbow Nation' in 1995, the last few years have proven challenging for many South Africans. South Africa has shown the world its potential to do big things well, such as hosting a successful World Cup, but its ability to address major challenges at local levels, such as crime or reliable access to water or education, remains problematic. This is partly related to insufficient capacity to build local resilience, and a lack of reliable critical infrastructure.

Prior research has confirmed the importance of a decentralized, networked policy for the South African infrastructure crisis (Niekerk and Visser, 2010). Decentralization implies adequate information sharing systems, coordination between public agencies and municipalities, and the active involvements of citizens. However, it remains unclear how decentralized, networked information infrastructures can be organized and capitalized upon for local resilience (Boin, 2008). This project aims to identify different organizational models of multi-disciplinary information sharing, along two key dimensions.

First, *centralization – decentralization*, related to information sharing among different organizations and authorities, as well as with citizens. The research context underlying this dimension will be the current decentralization process of South African water authorities. This case will help identify how information infrastructures are generated over time, and which emergent infrastructural conditions enable or inhibit information sharing between authorities and local stakeholders, in an organized process of decentralization. The second dimension is *frequent – infrequent information sharing*, related to routine and non-routine activities of relevant actors. South Africa's crisis infrastructures provide a useful research context, disclosing how information infrastructures function under the pressure of sudden, critical incidents (such as political tensions and elections). Crisis infrastructures are highly intertwined with other infrastructures such as telecommunications, railways, healthcare and water, and a critical indicator of societal wellbeing, namely safety.

Studying these two components from a multi-disciplinary perspective (Jordaan et al., 2007) should provide a well-rounded analysis of information infrastructures, among and between key stakeholders in decentralization processes. The research will also provide an important societal contribution by providing insight into inhibiting and enabling factors in strengthening local resilience, in the current reality of a decentralizing and democratizing South African context.

References

Boin, R.A. (Ed.) (2008). *Crisis Management: An Anthology*. London: Sage.

Niekerk, D. and R. Visser (2010). Experience on decentralized mechanism and funding for Disaster Risk Reduction in South Africa. Paper presented at Second Ministerial Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction in Africa Nairobi. http://acds.co.za/uploads/Conf_Papers/DRR_local_gov_Dewald_van_Niekerk.pdf.

Jordaan, A. J., Demediuk, P., Burchell, M., McGuire, C. K., Ikpa, V., Mow, K. E. & Anastasiadou, S. D. (2007). Disaster Risk Assessment at Municipal Level in South Africa: The Need for a Multidisciplinary Approach. *International Journal of Interdisciplinary Social Sciences*, 2(6): 77-82.

Rupp, S. (2012). Emergency preparedness and disaster planning in Africa: http://www.consultancyafrica.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1114:emergency-

[preparedness-and-disaster-planning-in-africa&catid=57:africa-watch-discussion-papers&Itemid=263.](#)

Requirements

- Master degree or Research Master degree, in social sciences with specialization in Organization Science, Business Administration, Sociology, Communications, or Political Sciences. Other specializations also acceptable if candidate can display relevant background knowledge.
- Proficiency in English
- Experience with qualitative research methods, social network analysis theory and methods preferred but not required.
- Affinity with interdisciplinary work linking information systems with societal analysis
- Willingness to spend time abroad

Information

For additional information please contact:

Name: Kees Boersma

Phone number: +31(0)5986769

E-mail: f.k.boersma@vu.nl

Website: www.keesboersma.com

FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

PhD-position “Hostile media perceptions? Understanding the mass Media's role on polarization and group conflict in South Africa”

Background information Faculty/Department/Research group, in which the PhD student will be based

The student will be based at the *Social Change Research Lab* at the UNISA School of Interdisciplinary Research and Graduate Studies in the College of Graduate Studies (<http://www.unisa.ac.za/Default.asp?Cmd=ViewContent&ContentID=27153>), which is located at Science Campus in Johannesburg. The *Social Change Research Lab* is a research group focusing on the South African social change processes from a social psychological perspective. It consists, besides the South

African supervisor, of one post- doctoral fellow, six PhD students and five Master's students as well as international visiting professors (Prof Jim Sidanius, Harvard University and Prof Sven Waldzus, University Institute of Lisbon).

Among Prof. Dumont's teaching offers are also courses in advanced statistical and data analyses (e.g., in SPSS), which resonates well with the training idea of the Desmond Tutu programme.

In addition, at UNISA, specific subsidies are granted to students with disadvantaged educational backgrounds to enable them accomplishing their MA study. It is intended to recruit a student for the Desmond Tutu PhD position from this pool of supported students.

Details South African supervisor:

Prof. Dr. Kitty Dumont

Social Change Research Lab

School of Interdisciplinary Research and Graduate Studies

College of Graduate Studies

University of South Africa (UNISA)

Contents of the research project

Mass media should not only portray the diversity of opinions, but also promote consent in society. This correlation function of the mass media corresponds to the journalistic practice to provide fair, neutral, and objectively balanced coverage of ambivalent events or controversies. In public conflicts, e.g., about diverging ideological positions, this journalistic practice is tied to the hope that opinionated individuals engage in deliberation and mutual understanding, which may eventually resolve conflicts (McLeod, 2009). However, research on the hostile media effect has repeatedly shown that members of groups involved in a public conflict perceive fair and objectively balanced mass media coverage as being unfairly biased toward the opposing side (see for overviews Hansen & Kim, 2011; Perloff, 2015; Vallone & Lepper, 1985). This may imply that balanced mass media coverage may fail to provide consensus between conflict groups (Mutz, 2006). Even worse, it may backfire and instigate anger and stronger in-group - out-group perceptions. The present project will examine if neutral and balanced media coverage indeed sharpens conflict lines by increasing polarization between opposing groups. To this end, the project will examine the hostile media effect and polarization across selected public conflicts from a social identity perspective, in South Africa. The project will make an important contribution to the debated function of mass media in society, the maxim of fair and neutral coverage, and the general role of mass media in instigating vs. mitigating polarization and conflicts.

Requirements

- Master degree in psychology or communication sciences
- Proficiency in English, and any African language
- Writing skills and experience preferred
- Willingness to engage in a theory-driven research approach
- Willingness to acquire quantitative data-analytical skills (e.g., in SPSS) if not yet fully developed

Information

Name: Kitty Dumont

Phone number: +27 11 670 9435

E-mail: dumonkb@unisa.ac.za

Website: <http://www.unisa.ac.za/Default.asp?Cmd=ViewContent&ContentID=27388>

or (at the VU)

Name: Tilo Hartmann

Phone number: +31 (0)20 598 6899

E-mail: t.hartmann@vu.nl

Website: <http://tinyurl.com/tilohartmann>

Additional collaborates will be Jaap Ouwkerk and Martin Tanis (both Communication Science, VU)

FACULTY OF MEDICINE

PhD-position 'Giving children a chance to live'

Background information Faculty/Department/Research group, in which the PhD student will be based

Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

The Research group of Prof. Dr. A.M. van Furth, Desmond Tutu Professor and Professor in Pediatric Infectious Diseases

Details South African supervisor:

To determine but most possibly University of Cape Town, Prof. Dr. Linda-Gail Becker. Tutu HIV Center in Cape Town

Contents of the research project**The current situation of HIV and Tuberculosis**

Children are dying. Currently, 3.3 million children around the world are living with HIV/AIDS, of whom 90 % live in Sub Saharan Africa. South Africa has the largest HIV epidemic in this region, with an estimated 300.000 infected children. Many HIV patients are also infected with TB. As a result, South Africa is also suffering from one of the largest TB epidemics in the world.

Adherence to treatment

An important challenge is to ensure that children infected with HIV receive proper treatment and can grow up normally, without being stigmatized. In South Africa treatment coverage is 54%. For children to survive and thrive they must take their medicine. Lack of adherence to the protocol adversely affects the severity of the disease and is the major cause of complications and even death. For HIV management, adherence to medication regimes is key to the suppression of viral load. This is indicative of long term, disease free survival. Non-adherence can compromise effectiveness of the drug. Non-adherence leads to hospitalizations. Hospital stays strain local health resources and put additional stresses on already-stressed caregivers. Non-adherence can lead to the development of drug-resistant viral strains that are especially dangerous in children. And non-adherence may hamper future treatment efforts. Maintaining high levels of adherence is thus absolutely essential. Pediatric adherence to treatment regimens is a major public health concern. HIV and TB each require an intensive medical regimen. Children must take their pills at regular times with nutritious food. Adhering to a treatment protocol is a complex challenge; it is even more challenging in a situation of poverty. Children may dislike the taste or odor of medication and refuse to take it. Many caregivers struggle to make ends meet in harsh and uncertain living conditions. Many caregivers do not believe in modern medicine. Because of the stigma associated with HIV infection caregivers are unwilling to disclose the child's seropositive status and access community support for treatment adherence.

Through this project we aim to create better health outcomes for children and thus enhance the health profile of communities.

Requirements

- Medical doctor, willing to live in Cape Town area
- If possible also experience in Theology

Information

For additional information please contact:

Prof. Dr. A.M. van Furth

Phone number: 0031651226587

E-mail: am.vfurth@vumc.nl

Prof. dr. Linda-Gail Bekker, University of Cape Town

Email: linda-gail.bekker@hiv-research.org.za

FACULTY OF SCIENCES

PhD-position 'Energy and charge transfer processes in photosynthesis'

Background information Faculty/Department/Research group, in which the PhD student will be based

The University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) was formed on 1 January 2004 as a result of the merger between the University of Durban-Westville and the University of Natal. The new university brings together the rich histories of both the former Universities. The Vision of UKZN is to be the Premier University of African Scholarship. The Mission of UKZN is to be a truly South African university that is academically excellent, innovative in research, critically engaged with society and demographically representative, redressing the disadvantages, inequities and imbalances of the past.

The Quantum Research Group is based in the School of Chemistry and Physics of UKZN. At the core of the Group is the South African Research Chair in Quantum Information Processing and Communication held by Prof. F. Petruccione. Traditionally, the Group has been working on the theory and applications of open quantum systems and quantum information processing. Recently, the Group has developed an active interest in Quantum Biology. In particular, the Group has been working on transport phenomena in photosynthesis, radical-pair magnetoreception, and quantum neural networks. The Group has organized Schools and Research Workshops in the field of Quantum Biology.

The Quantum Research Group at UKZN and the VU Biophysics Group have started to interact at a Summer School on Quantum Biology in South Africa in January 2012. Prof Rienk van Grondelle was one of the invited speakers and the Quantum Research Group had organized the event. This was the

beginning of an intense collaboration and of a series of visits. Currently, the results of the interaction are being summarized in a first joint publication.

For more information about the University of KwaZulu-Natal please see <http://www.ukzn.ac.za>.

For more information about the Quantum Research Group please see <http://quantum.ukzn.ac.za>.

The Biophysics group at the VU University in Amsterdam is one of the leading research groups in the world studying the primary processes of photosynthesis using advanced ultrafast, single molecule and other laser-spectroscopic techniques. The major two topics of research concern the two fundamental ultrafast events at the basis of the high quantum efficiency of photosynthesis: excitation energy transfer in the light harvesting antenna followed by charge separation in the photosynthetic reaction center. Rienk van Grondelle has made major contributions to our current physical picture of these events. More recently this research has developed an important program in the area of artificial photosynthesis and biohybrid solar cells. For more information see

http://www.nat.vu.nl/en/research/biophysics_physicsenergy/BiophysicsOfEnergy/index.asp or www.rienkvangrondelle.nl

Details South African supervisor:

Prof Francesco Petruccione

South African Research Chair in Quantum Information Processing and Communication

School of Chemistry and Physics, Westville Campus

University of KwaZulu-Natal

Private Bag X54001

Durban 4000, South Africa

Tel: +27 (0)31 260 2770

petruccione@ukzn.ac.za

<http://quantum.ukzn.ac.za>

<http://about.me/francesco.petrucione>

Contents of the research project

Energy and charge transfer processes in photosynthesis

Sunlight energy far exceeding human consumption is constantly incident on the Earth's surface. A class of organisms has perfected a method of harvesting this energy over a period of billions of years: this process is called photosynthesis. Understanding photosynthesis on a microscopic scale is necessary to engineer biologically-inspired artificial photosynthetic systems, which would allow us to

utilize renewable sunlight energy with greater efficiency than is presently possible.

Biological systems are open systems, constantly exchanging energy and matter with the environment to maintain the non-equilibrium state synonymous with living. The natural theoretical framework in which to study those biological processes not well described by classical physics is that of the theory of open quantum systems. Prof. Francesco Petruccione, the head of the quantum research group in Durban, is an expert in the field, having co-authored the monograph “The Theory of Open Quantum Systems”. One of the more recent and exciting foci of the group in Durban is the topic of energy and charge transfer in photosynthesis.

Impressive experimental achievements have led to an increased focus in the life sciences on detailed explanations of macroscopic phenomena in terms of molecular structures and mechanisms. Prof. Rienk van Grondelle is a leading expert worldwide in photosynthesis, and the head of the biophysics research group in Amsterdam. The group has made unprecedented progress in unraveling the physics of photosynthetic light-harvesting and light-driven charge separation, through the experimental characterization of structures and dynamics involved, amongst many achievements.

The research project would entail the investigation of primary energy and charge transfer processes in photosynthesis, from both theoretical and experimental perspectives. Many aspects of the relation between structure and function in photosynthetic antennae and reaction centers are not fully understood, and the aim of the project would be to extend current knowledge of primary photosynthesis through open quantum systems models of aspects of the processes currently being investigated experimentally. More specifically, the quantum mechanisms identified during the project, for example to improve efficiency or protection, should be interpreted in a way so as to inform engineering techniques in artificial photosynthetic systems.

Requirements

- Master degree in Physics
- Proficiency in English
- Experience with theoretical methods of (quantum) physics

Information

For additional information please contact:

Name: Prof Francesco Petruccione, University of Kwa Zulu Natal

Phone number: +27 (0)31 2602770

E-mail: Petruccione@ukzn.ac.za

Website: <http://quantum.ukzn.ac.za>

FACULTY OF SCIENCES

PhD-position 'Creating Web and Voice Services in Multiple Languages for Rural Development in Africa'

Background information Faculty/Department/Research group, in which the PhD student will be based

Prof. Dr. J.M. (Hans) Akkermans

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (VUA)

Faculty of Sciences (FEW), Department of Informatics (FEW/INF)

& The Network Institute (www.networkinstitute.org)

W4RA research program

(Web alliance for Regreening in Africa, W4RA, www.w4ra.org)

Details South African supervisor:

(proposed)

Prof. Dr. Etienne Barnard

North-West University

Vaal Triangle Campus, Faculty of Economic Sciences and Information Technology

School of Information Technology

MuST postgraduate research group

(Multilingual Speech Technologies, www.nwu.ac.za/vtc-research-must-homepage-0)

Contents of the research project

The aim of the PhD research project is to develop and deploy a scalable, sustainable and affordable methodology and toolkit for creating voice services in multiple African languages. These voice services aim at information distribution and knowledge sharing over mobile phones and radio, supporting rural development, particularly in rural regions and for village populations where typically no Internet and Web is available. Results of the PhD work will be tested under realistic field conditions for various

societally important services (agri-markets, cattle vet, meteo, etc.) and multiple languages in two different countries: South Africa and Ghana (linked to other ongoing PhD research on the topic).

The project is a step further on top of the earlier collaborative work in the field of ICT4D (D for Development) by both proposed supervisors, which was carried out and deployed in Mali on voice services in different languages (French, Bambara, Bomu) concerned with the spread of agri-product market information (Radio Marché), demonstrating the feasibility of the concept, in the context of the EU Commission-African FP7 project VOICES.

Requirements

- Master degree in an ICT-development related area such as Information Systems, Artificial Intelligence, Computer Science or Computational Linguistics
- Proficiency in English
- Affinity or technical experience with multiple languages and/or speech technologies/voice services is a pre
- Willingness to work in interdisciplinary teams and in different countries

Information

For additional information please contact:

Name: Prof. Dr. J.M. (Hans) Akkermans

Phone number: +31 20 598 7782 (c/o Ms. Mojca Lovrencak, E: m.lovrencak@vu.nl)

E-mail: Hans.Akkermans@akmc.nl

Website: www.w4ra.org

Faculty of Behavioural and Movement Sciences

PhD-position 'Attachment, self-concept and exploration, can they be enhanced in at-risk families with young children'

Background information Faculty/Department/Research group, in which the PhD student will be based

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Faculty of Behavioural and Movement Sciences

Department: Clinical child and family studies

Program: Challenges to childrearing relationships

Focus: Attachment and caregiving

In our department we have 1 full professor, 8 assistant/associate professors, 4 teaching staff, 2 Researchers/postdoc, 7 PhD students, secretarial staff and guests.

The proposed study will be part of our research focus area: 'Caregiving of children with special needs'. Children who are vulnerable due to intellectual, physical, and/or visual disabilities or chronic illness need adequate care even more than other children. Goals for this topic are (1) to increase the impact of our stress-attachment model of challenging behavior in the field of research, training, and practice; (2) to validate assessments of caregiving and attachment in special needs populations; (3) to develop and test interventions that not only prevent mental health risks but that may also promote development through resilience against stress and increased motivation.

For more information see: <http://www.fgb.vu.nl/nl/index.aspx>

Promotor of this study: Prof. dr. C. Schuengel, Challenges to childrearing relationships

Co-promotor and coordinator: Dr. P. S. Sterkenburg, Assistant professor 'Caregiving of children with special needs'.

Co-promotor: J. Zevalkink, Senior lecturer 'developmental psychology'.

Details South African supervisor:

We have a long-term exchange project with Skool vir Psigososiale Gedragwetenskappe, North-West University Potchefstroom, South Africa. Prof. dr. E. van Rensburg is the coordinator of the collaborations at North-West University. In collaboration Dr. R. Spies received his PhD at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam in December 2015. The theme of his study was: Parenting, attachment and support network experiences of mothers diagnosed with HIV and Psychosis. Both Prof. van Rensburg and Dr. Spies are members of staff see: <http://www.nwu.ac.za/staff-school-psychosocial-behavioral-sciences>

Contents of the research project

The attachment figure acts as an emotionally secure base for exploratory behaviors (Ainsworth and Bowlby, 1991; Feeney et al., 2007). Exploratory behaviors includes individual activity and/or joint attention (Mundy et al., 2007). A secure attachment promotes the intrinsic motivation to explore, to develop autonomy and experience wellbeing (Ryan and Deci, 2000). Secure attachment also facilitates open communication and feedback, supporting self-representations and self-esteem based on actual achievements and talents that may be more resilient against negative expectations from others. Vacaru

et al. (submitted) found a mediating effect of exploratory behavior on disturbed attachment and self-concept. The interrelation between attachment and exploration has been found in several normal populations. However, families with children with special needs face multiple challenges, especially in communities dealing with social and economic inequalities. A focus on strength within these families may be important to allow children with special needs the chance to contribute to their society.

In this project we want to examine the effect of interventions for high-risk families on the quality of the attachment organization, self-concept (autonomy) and exploration. Two interventions for high-risk families are: The ABC intervention, designed to enhance children's attachment organization in 10 sessions (Dozier et al., 2009); and The Developmental Education for Families (DEF) designed to stimulate autonomy development and autonomy. The DEF sessions are of the same duration (10-hr-long sessions) and frequency (weekly) as the ABC intervention. We plan to replicate the Bernard, Dozier et al. study.

Requirements

- Master degree in Psychology
- Proficiency in English
- Affinity with children with special needs and with research in the field of parenting and relationships
- Willingness to do fieldwork also in rural areas of South Africa

Information

For additional information please contact:

Name: Dr. P.S. Sterkenburg

Phone number: +31(0)20-5988890

E-mail: p.s.sterkenburg@vu.nl

Website: <http://www.fgb.vu.nl/nl/over-de-faculteit/medewerkers-alfabetisch/medewerkers-q-s/p-sterkenburg/publications.aspx>