Digital skills of the social service professionals in South Africa

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Digital skills of the social service professionals in SA

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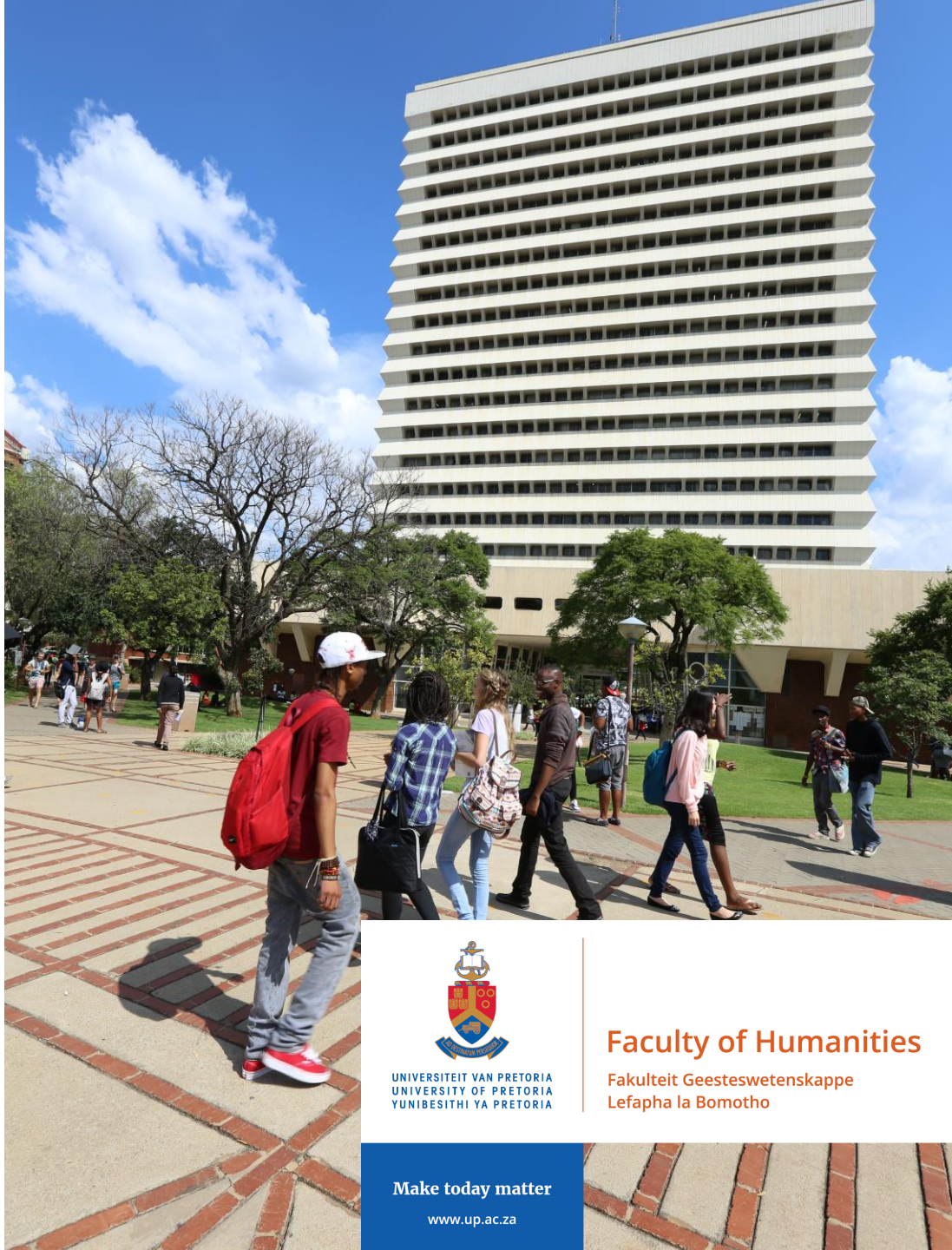
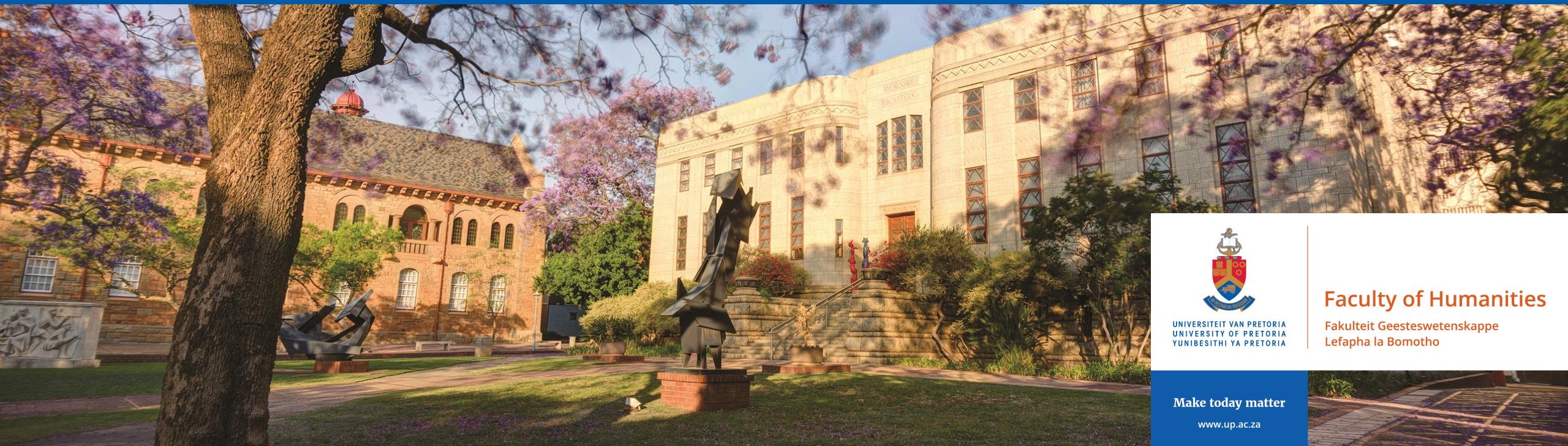
Past decade of social services in SA

- Unique history and the infringement of human rights due to Apartheid in SA – created gaps and inequality
- White Paper for Social Welfare & the **developmental approach** as a practice framework for welfare (Patel, 2015:82). Opened the way to be social agents on an individual-, family-, group- as well as community level (Lombard, 2019:48).
- The ideals of equal rights, social justice, empowerment, dignity, and access to resources should provide to all people the ability to participate in the social, economic, and political spheres (Oyedemi, 2015:455).
- The importance of human relationships for people's welfare, especially in times of disaster, when social workers turn to alternative online methods to stay connected to clients (Farkas and Romaniuk, 2020:73).



PhD RESEARCH STUDY

A hybrid approach to inclusive social work practice in South Africa



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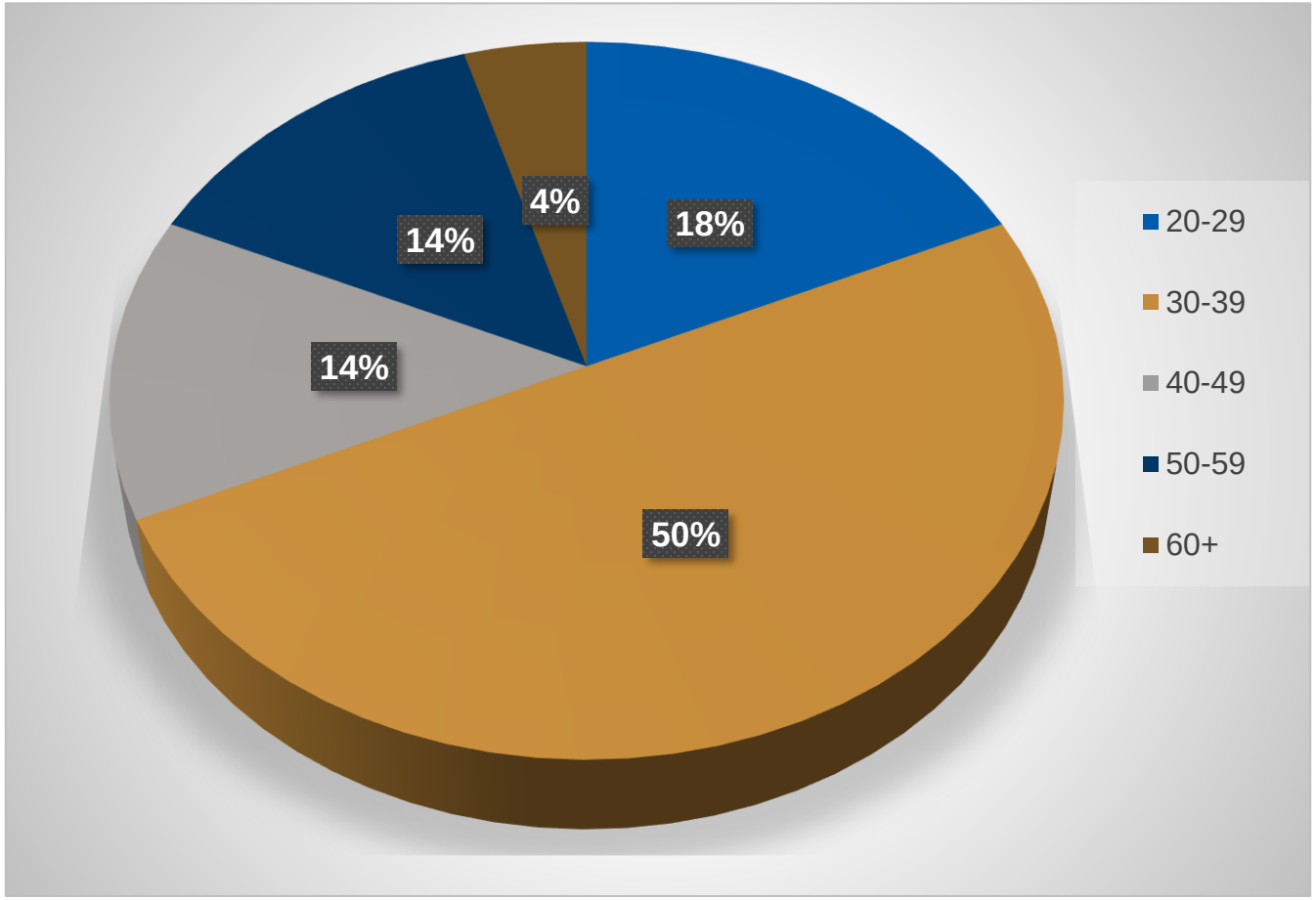
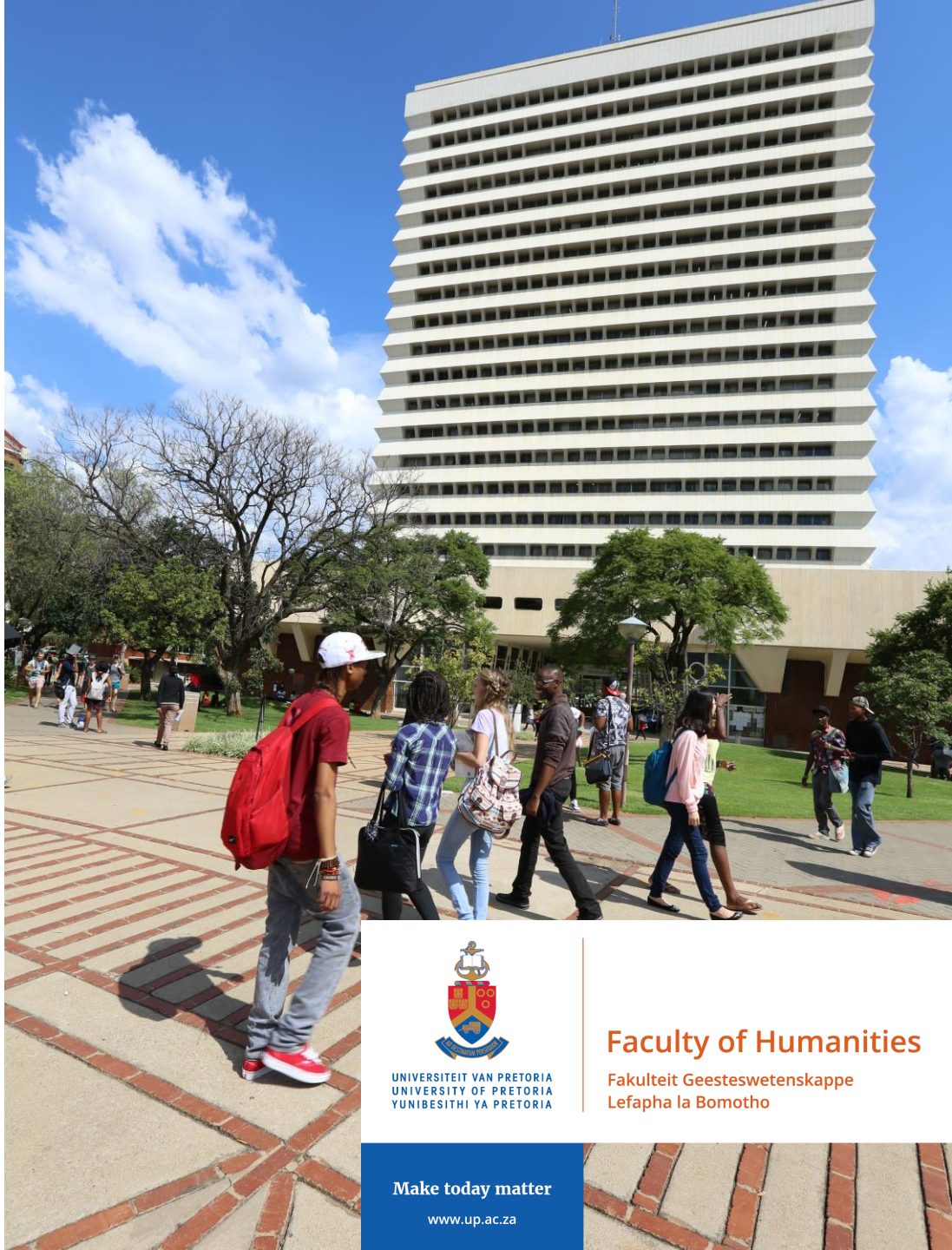
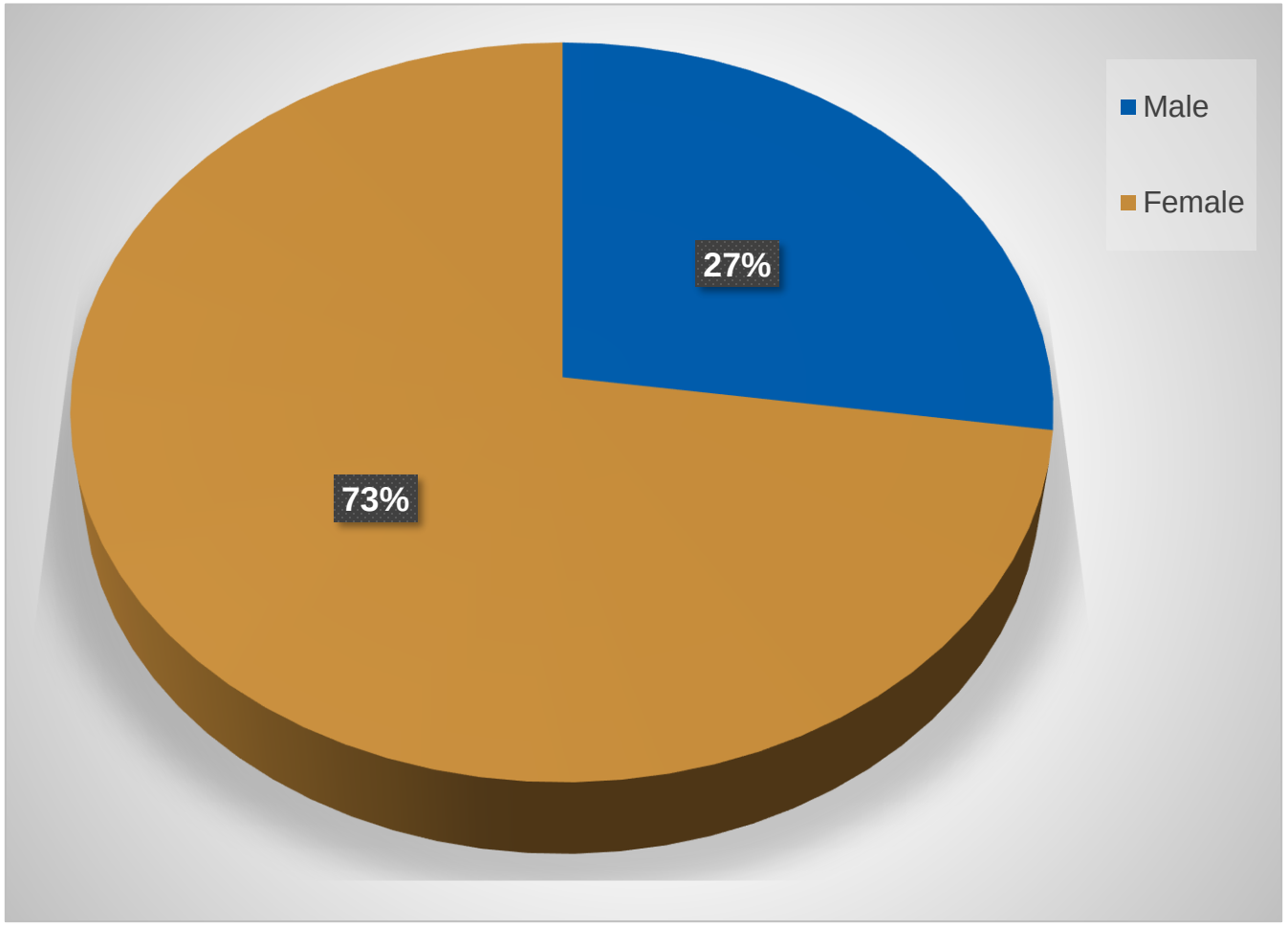
Age category of research participants





Gender of research participants



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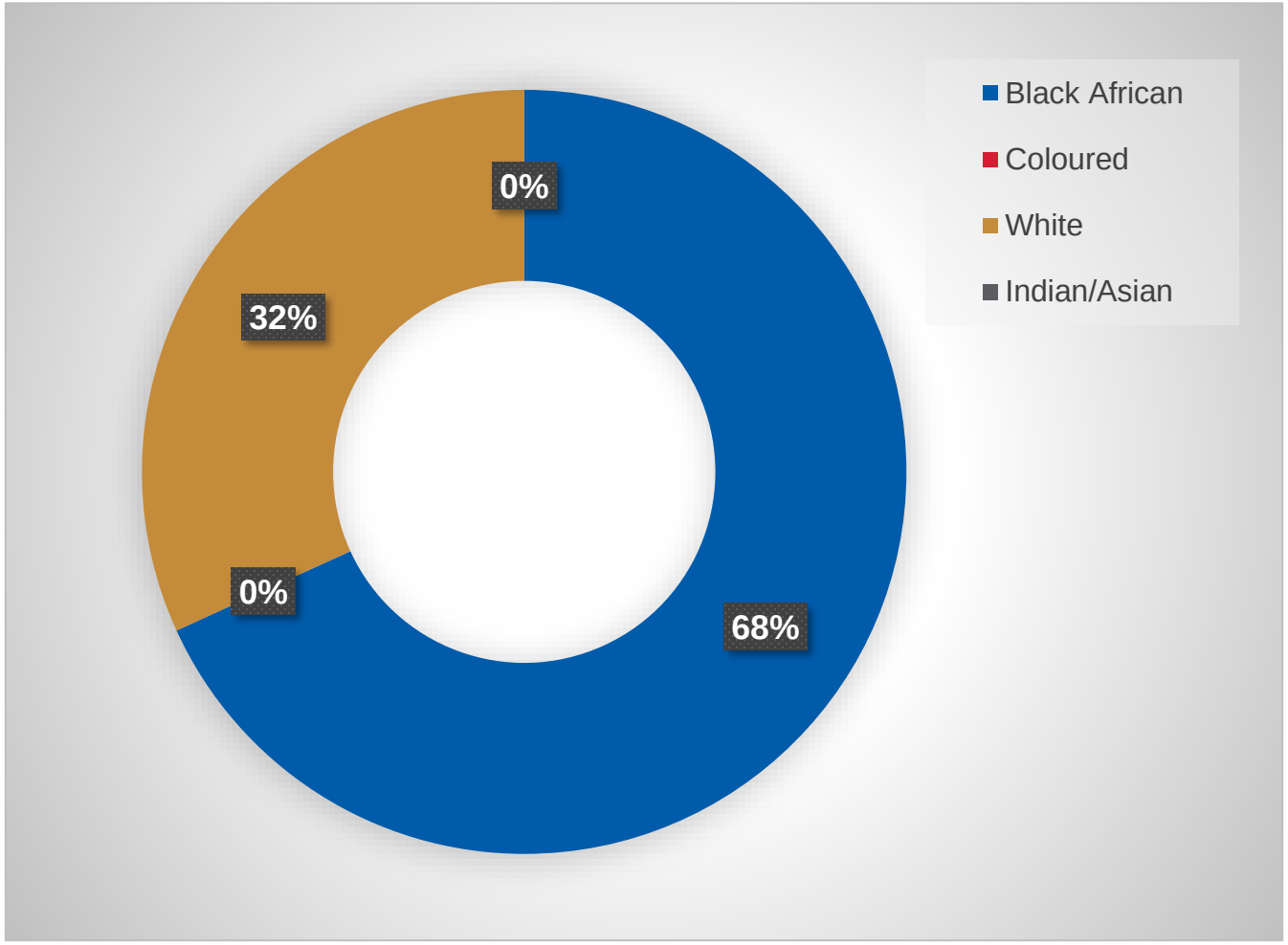
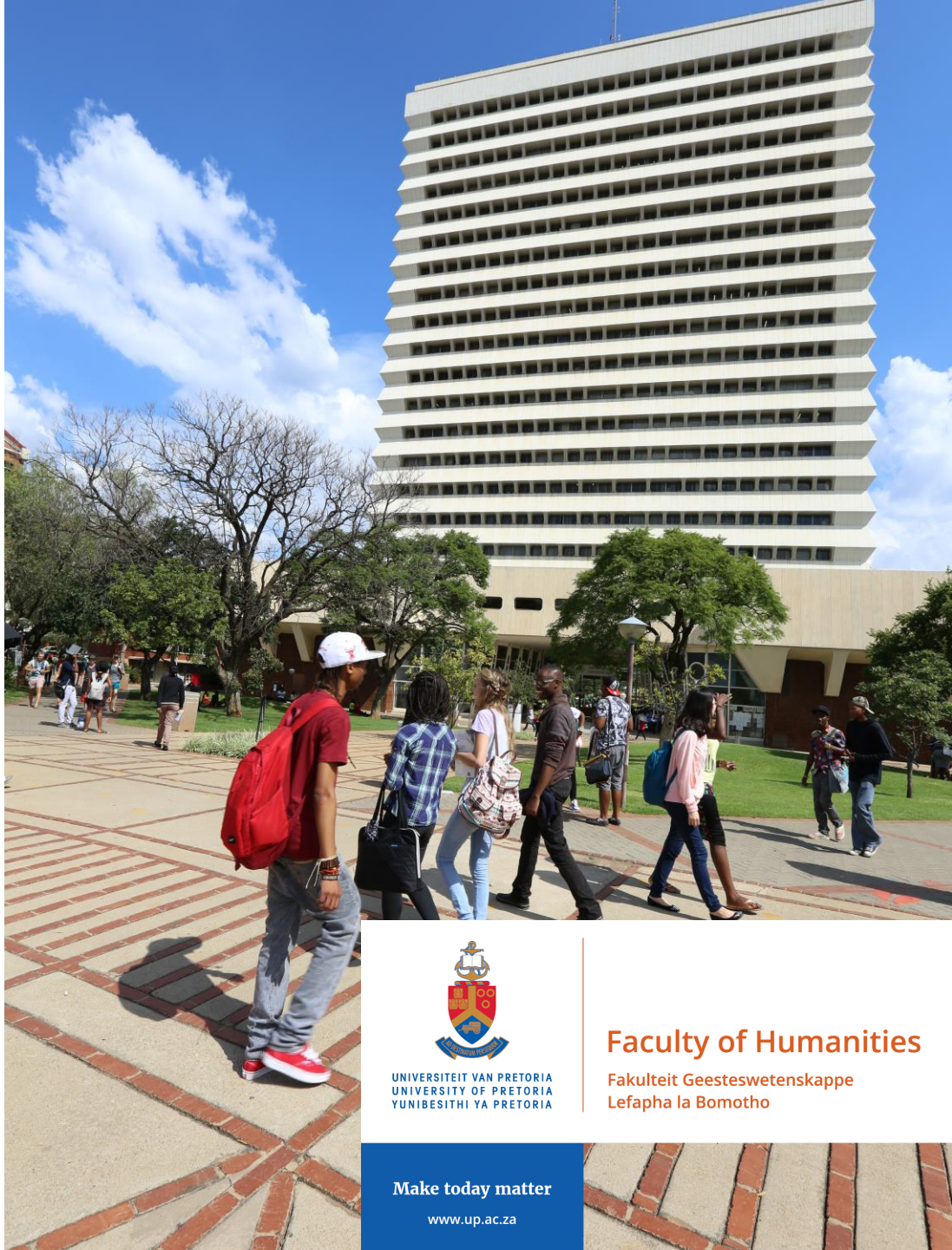
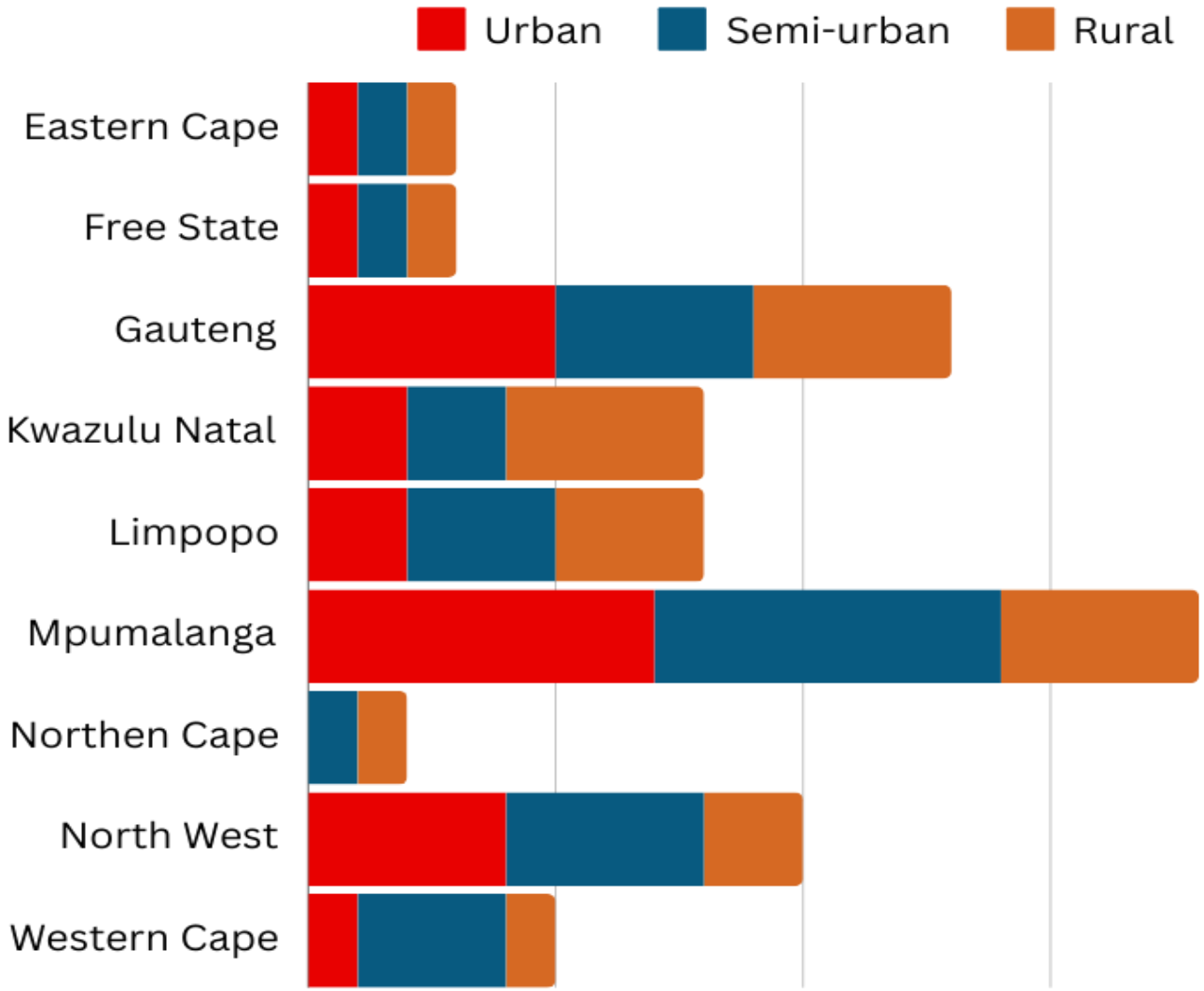
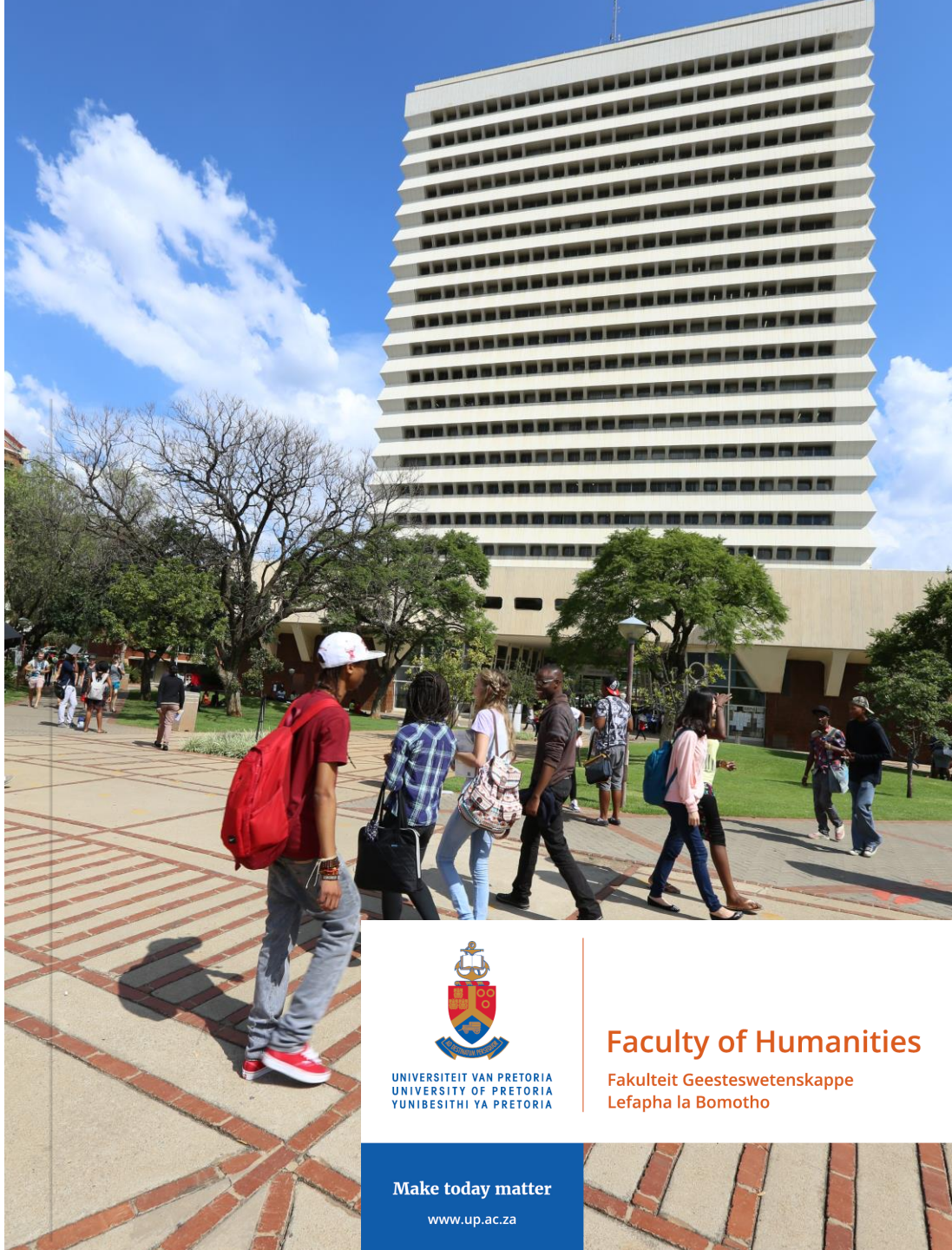
Demographics of research participants



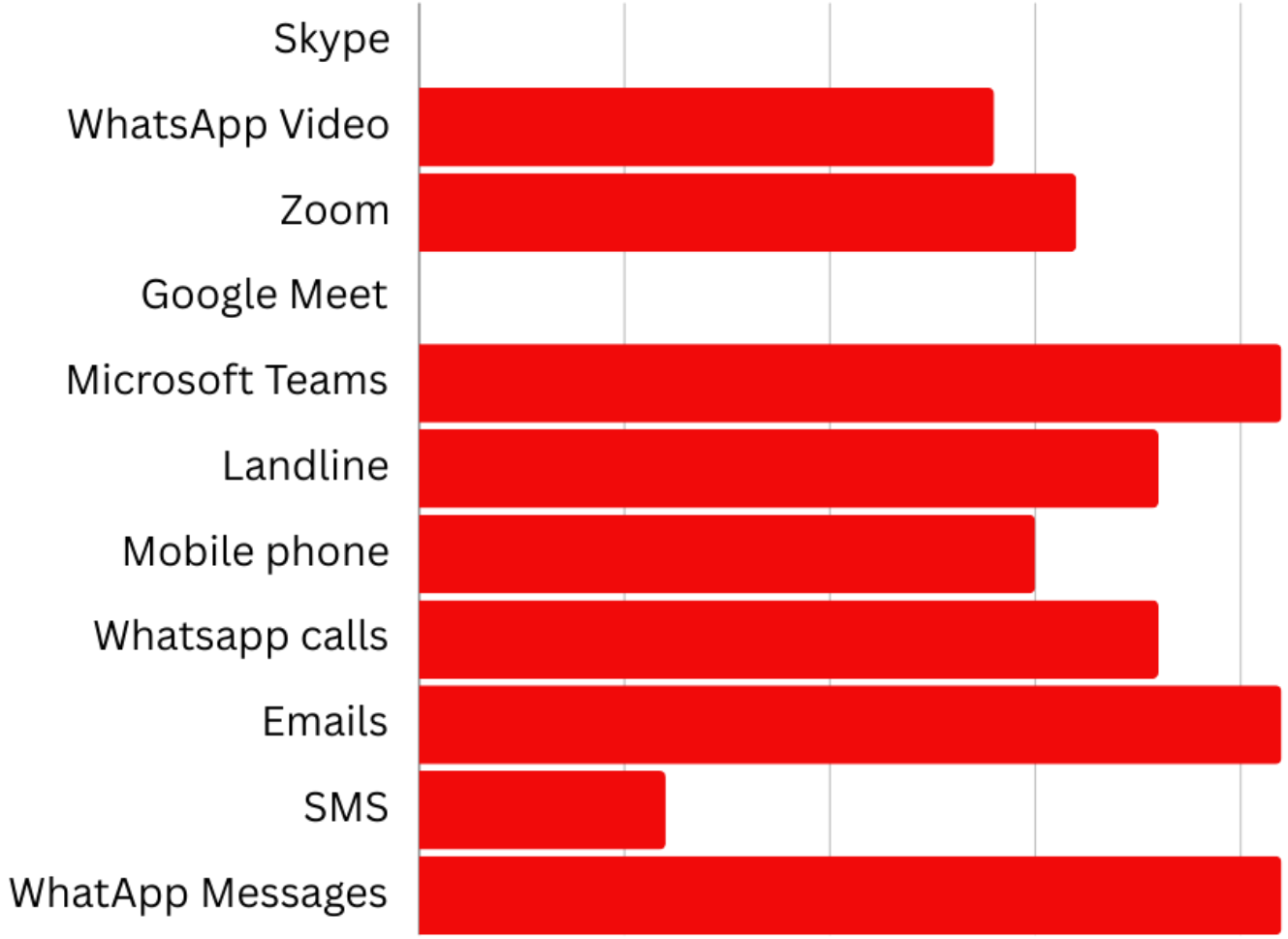


Provinces represented in the research study

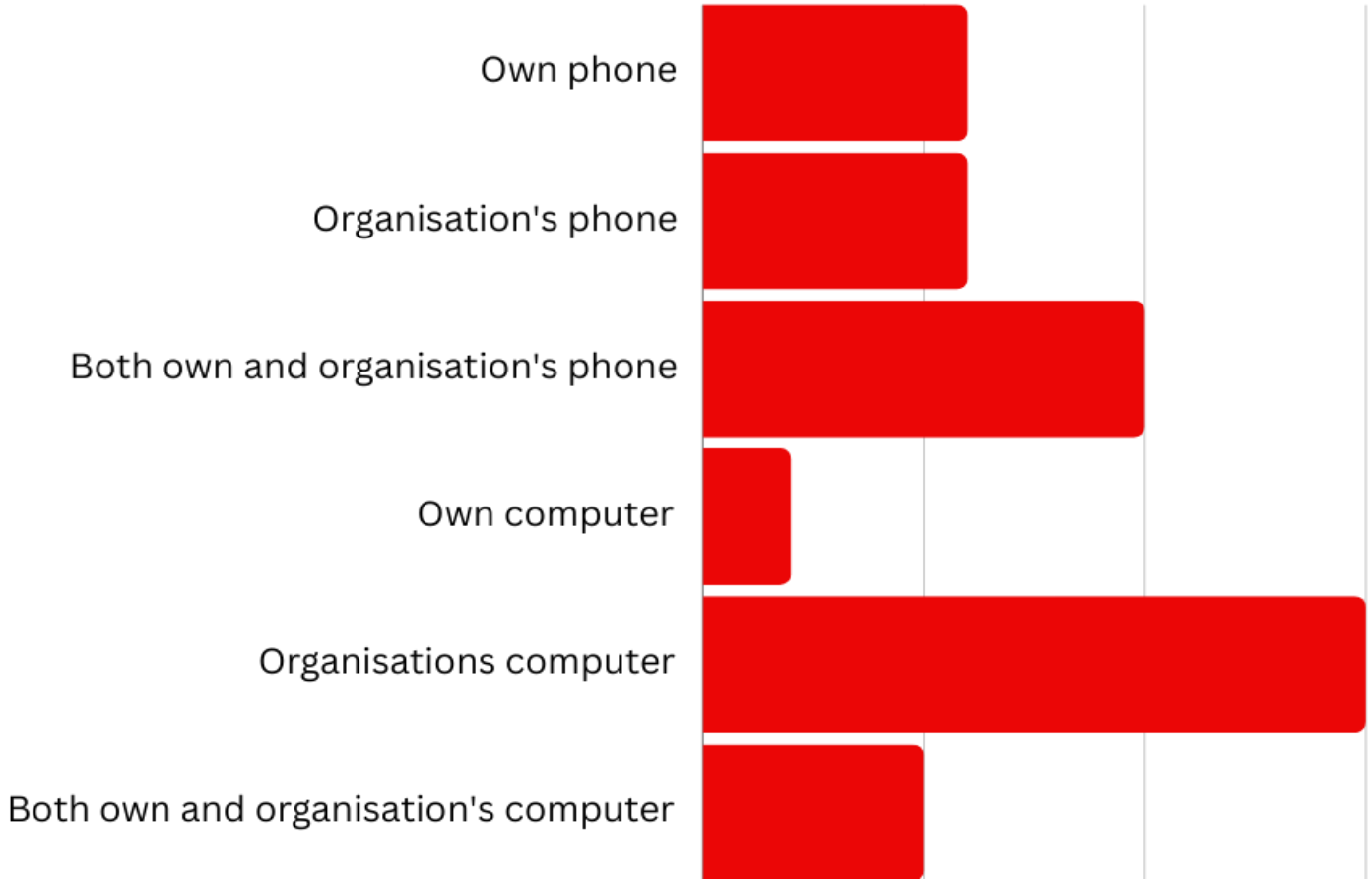




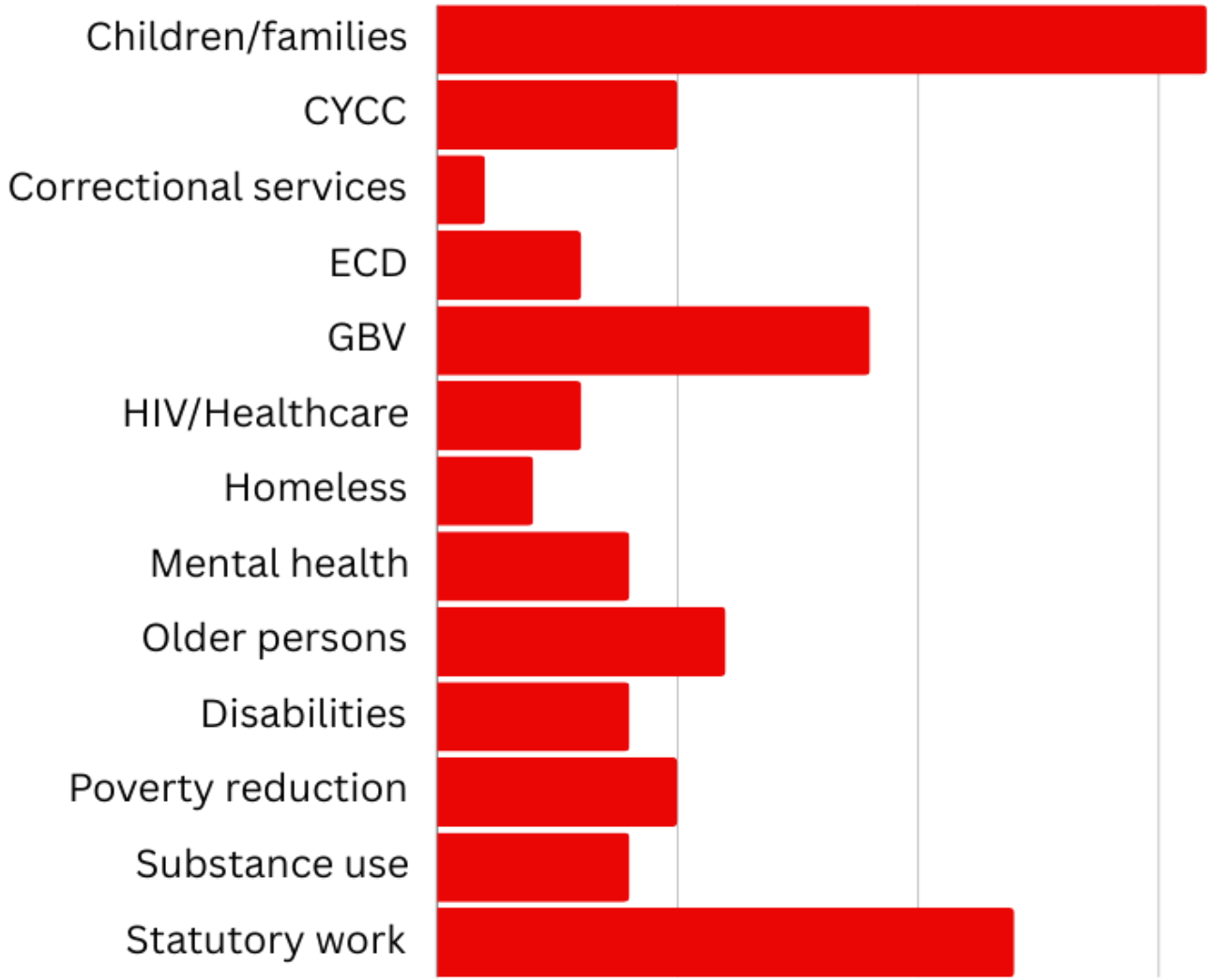
Technology currently used by research participants



Devices used by research participants

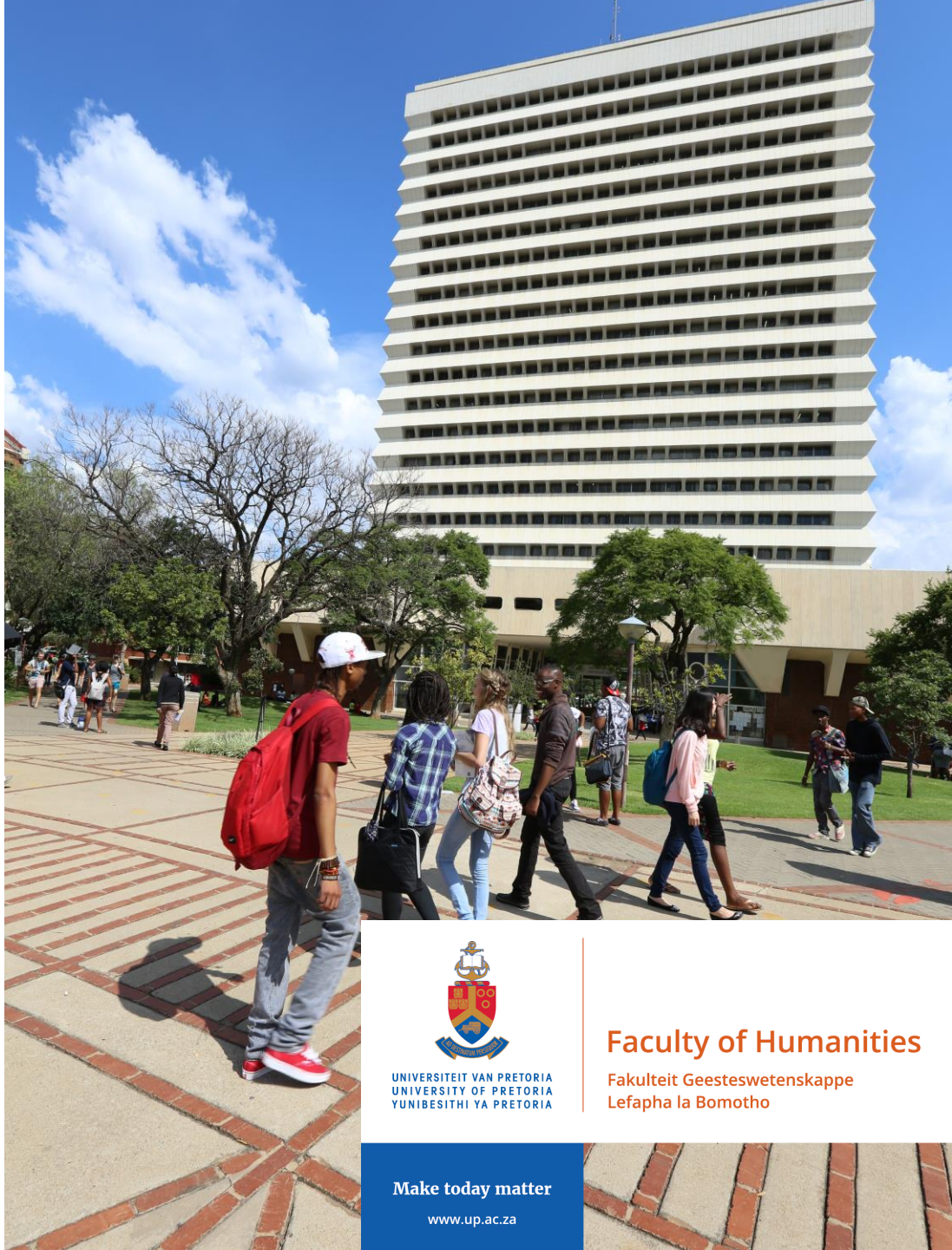


Fields of service in which research participants work



Digital exclusion & accessibility challenges in SA

- The 4IR and post COVID-19 - many clients are excluded:
- lack of internet access
- loadshedding
- no devices that could support technology.
- Access to technologies = to bridge the digital divide (Roode, Speight, Pollock & Webber, 2004:10).
- Digital access and technology adoption = a catalyst and driver of social justice (Botha, 2016:76)
- Social workers should utilise digital platforms = promote social justice and inclusion in the world, strengthen people's wellbeing and empowerment (Fiorentino, Romakkaniemi, Harrikari, Saraniemi and Tiitinen, 2022:449)



Digital exclusion & accessibility challenges in SA

- **Exclusion & illiteracy**

*“Definitely, technology is **excluding our service users** because some of our service users are illiterate. They still have to get the basics. They don't even have the basics.” **(P14)***

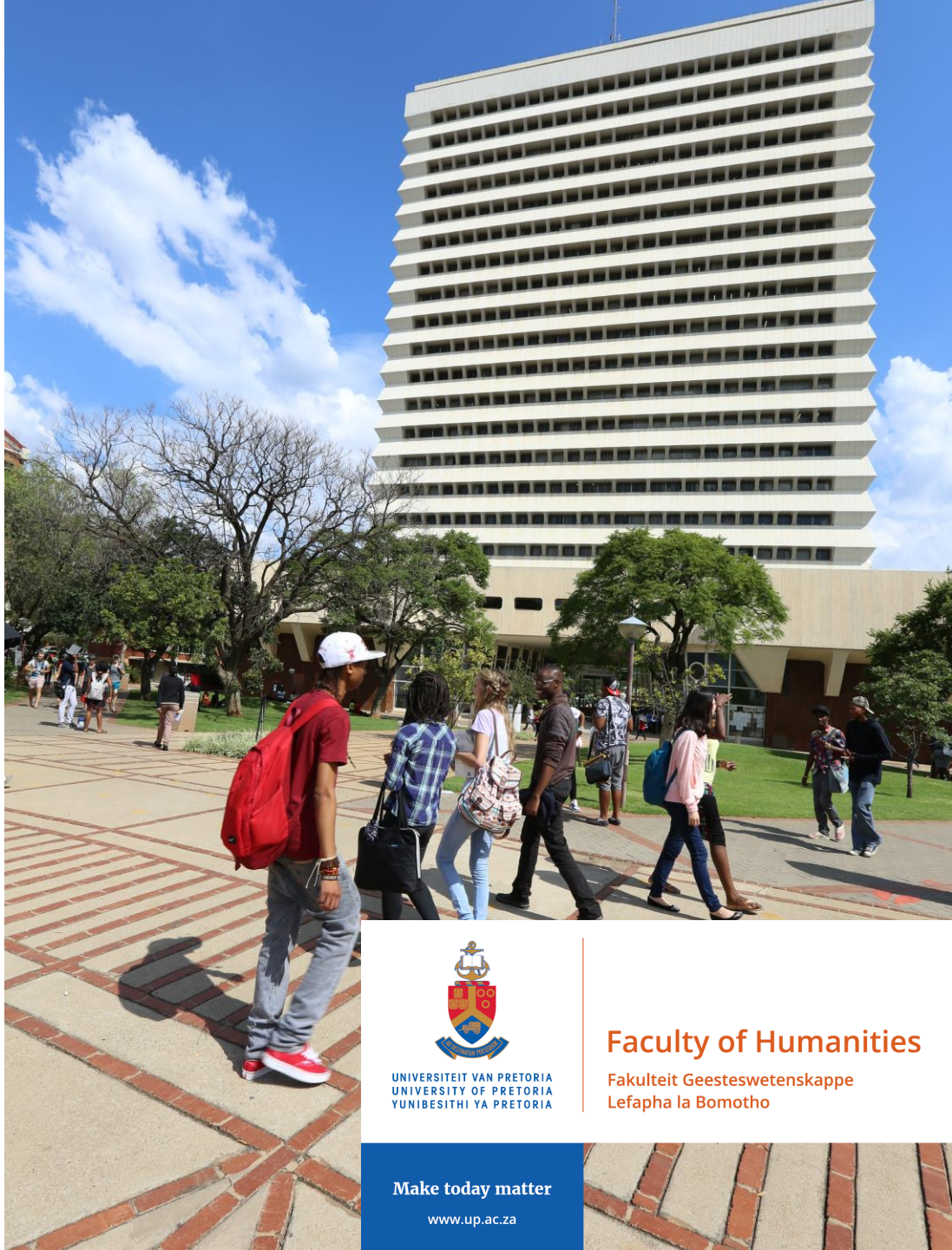
*“We're excluding them not because we want to but **through technology you will exclude them.** So that's why we use the combination.” **(P3)***

- **Accessibility linked to geographic areas**

*“So, **network is a problem since I'm based or we are based at a rural area**. So, the network is bad.” **(P7)***

- **Social workers level of comfort with technology**

*“I think, for me, I'm not really very technology prone. I'm not a person that embraces technology in terms of that my life is in technology….” **(P3)***

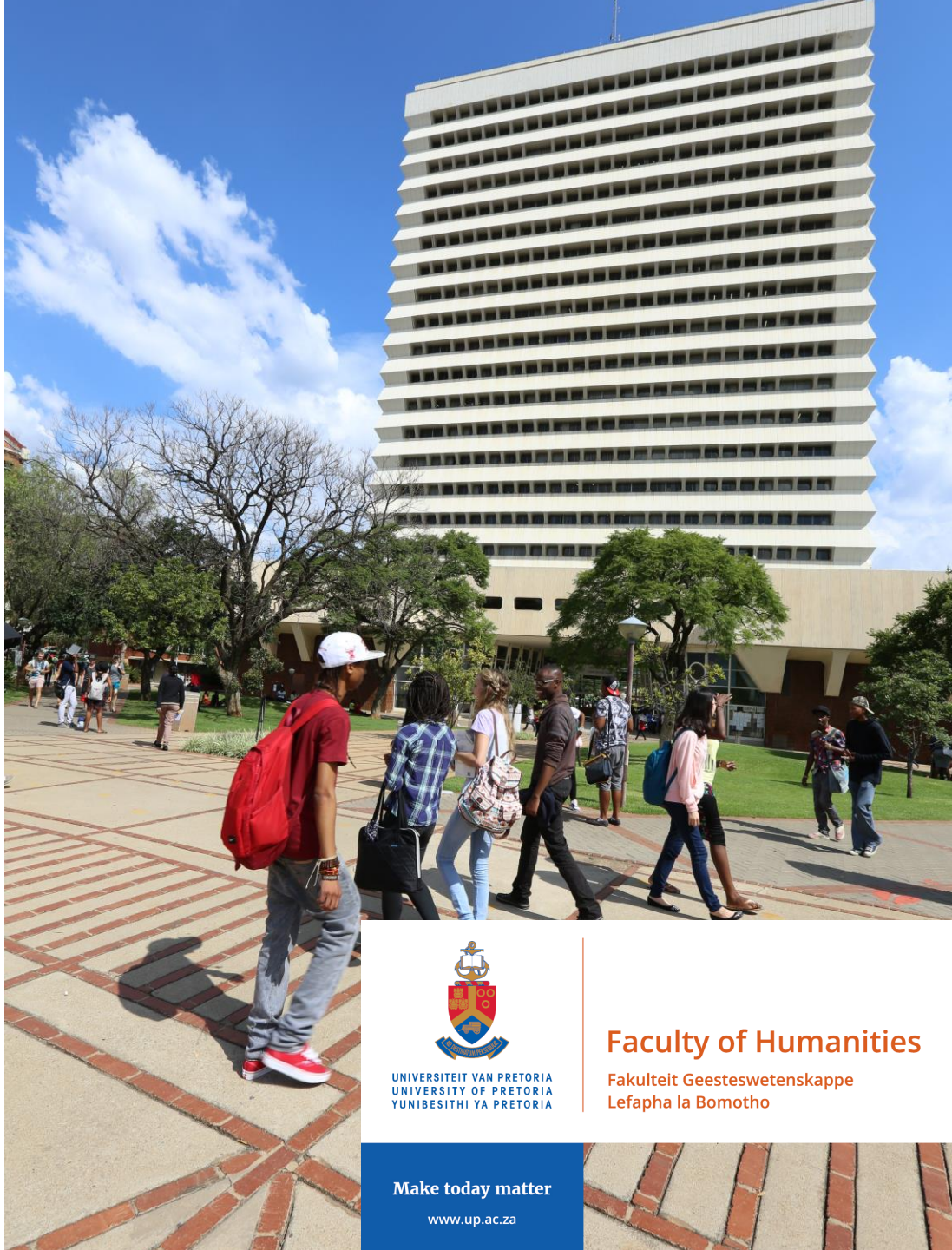


Digital skills of social workers

- Social work should not shy away from technology, but to view digitalisation as an opportunity to provide more services and interventions (Pelaez et al., 2021:6).

- Digital social work practice is vastly different from in-person methods, and therefore require particular training and competencies (Pelaez et al., 2021:6).

- Social workers need to develop technological literacy=>the competence to access and evaluate information using technology, and then being able to know which tools will be suitable for which services(Perron, Taylor, Glass and Margerum-Leys, 2010:76).



Digital skills of social workers in South Africa

"But in terms of the digitalization, whenever I go online, I will see that the case that is not yet attended by a social worker. ***So maybe by implementing this system, we will indeed do justice to our customers or clients****. I am very* ***happy about the digitalization that we're implementing in the department."*** ***(P11)***

"However, if we stay reluctant and say we are doing things the traditional way, we will be doing, you know, work to a certain extent, but would be limiting ourselves. So I think there is room for that and it would have to come from, as I said, from an individual to say, I think I have been hearing AI all over, let me try and see how it can improve the quality of my work or how I can make use of it in my daily duties, right? And so, yeah, ***it is here to help us, so why not?"*** ***(P2)***

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Digital skills of social workers in South Africa

- **Online supervision**

“I think supervision is something that can be online because what I realise in the field is that most social workers don't get any supervision for that. No, nothing. And that is for me scary because we work in a field that is difficult, so you need the regular supervision.” ***(P20)***

- **Basic platforms e.g. WhatsApp**

“If you are adaptable enough to make use of all forms of technology, or a basic one, let's say a Zoom call or a WhatsApp video call, and you are ***able to access clients that you wouldn't have been able to accommodate*** *or access previously, and then at a later stage, in person session if necessary, you enable yourself, I think, and the client to* ***get service faster and more efficiently*** *and probably have more sessions or build a better relationship or sort things out quicker. So I'm very positive about it. And then I think in a lot of places, it's already being used, but I wish we would move a bit faster.”* ***(P16)***

“WhatsApp really is the one. Yeah, WhatsApp, your WhatsApp calls, your WhatsApp videos and everything because of my beneficiaries.” ***(P13)***

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Digital skills of social workers in South Africa

- **Electronic management of data and files**

"There was a time when I started social work, excuse me, and we were just using physical files to store information. But I can see we are ***slowly starting to merge and have files stored on computers****. And which is very good because then it has a lot of influences in that, good influences in that."* ***(P12)***

- **Online panel discussions**

"So you can't gather all those people for panels at the school, so it's easier then to do it online. So this has influenced it much more positively after COVID." ***(P20)***

Digital skills of social workers in South Africa

- **Assessment and planning treatment using digital tools**

"And I think technology, being able to really, you know, the value of social work often lies in the ability to ***assess correctly, accurately, and then compiling or planning a successful or effective intervention plan****, you know, just to show where do we start to fix this problem. If you do that with the aid of an app, or a very sophisticated impact report, or something like that, it carries so much more value for the client, and it's more sophisticated, so it's already getting more respect. I think, than a handwritten note discussion, or something that is just a free service that's not valued. So, I'm hoping that, I think, if everybody embraces what's available, we could really* ***refine and redefine and make social work more respected****, and really bring across the value."* ***(P16)***

Digital skills of social workers in South Africa

- **Assessment skills required to know what technology to use**

*“Because it's **not a one size fits all**. And how do you know which service user will need to be reached with which kind of technology?”* ***(P9)***

- **Digital literacy of social workers -> leading to improved service delivery**

*“But in terms of the digitalization, whenever I go online, I will see that the case that is not yet attended by a social worker. So maybe by implementing this system, we will **indeed do justice to our customers or clients**. I am very happy about the digitalization that we're implementing in the department.”* ***(P11)***

Digital skills of social workers in South Africa

- **Online groupwork**

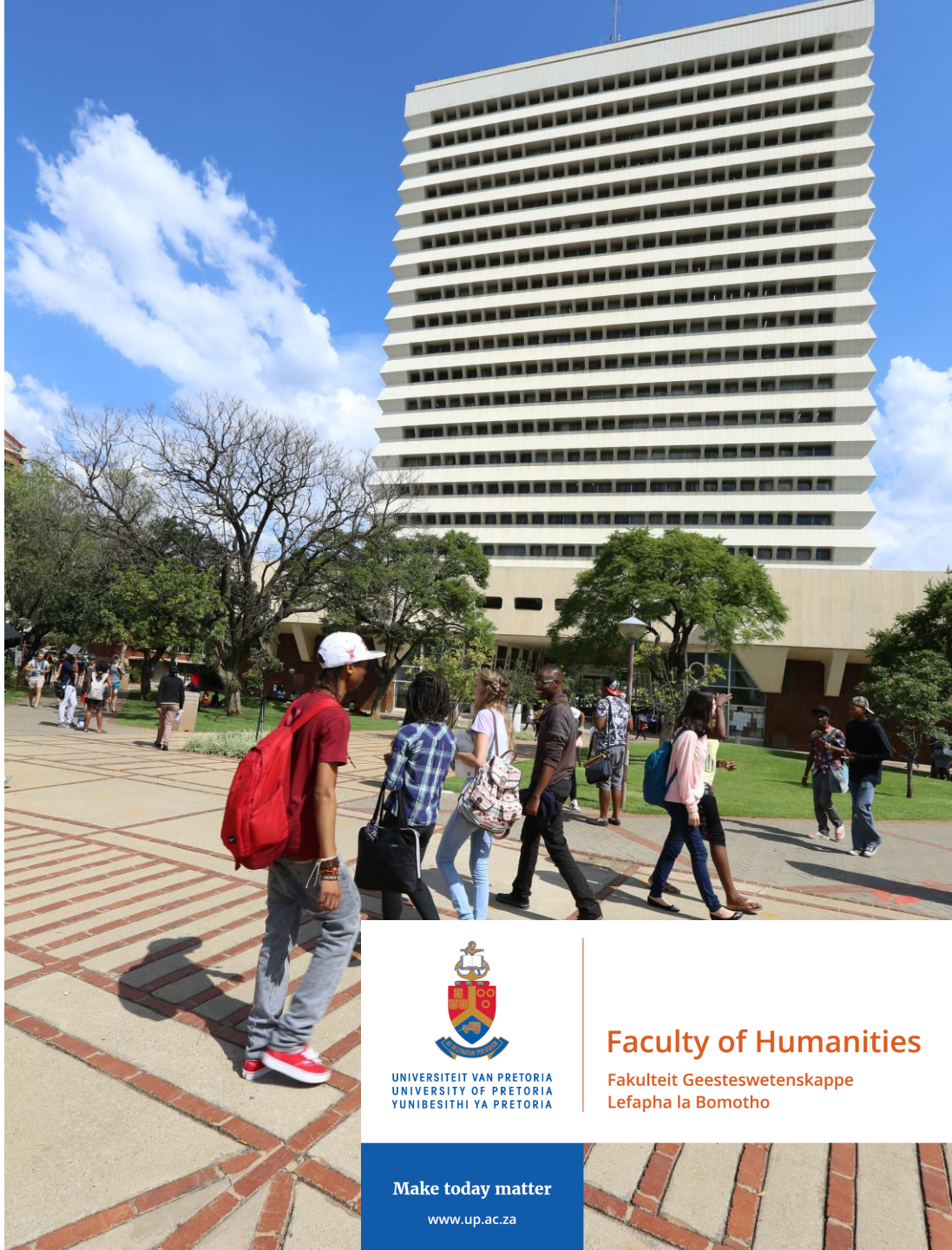
*"Am I supposed to be there physically? When doing casework, **group work,** community work, **you can use technology**."* ***(P15)***

- **Technological skills for communication**

*"But here I and a person with no knowledge or fluency whatsoever in her home language and she not in mine could have an engagement with each other that we actually understood what the other person meant to say. Given lots of effort but we **managed to do that through technology in a maybe a fumbling manner because it's it was maybe not the most efficient way of doing it but I think that just stuck out to me as an interaction that I know would have been impossible maybe even just as far back as 10 years ago.** Here I was communicating with a person in a completely different language as though I was a fluent native speaker **just by the use of technology** so that for me sticks out as definitely a story of the potential that technology has and looking back on that interaction what I would have done had I known then what I need now."* ***(P10)***

Hybrid practice in social work

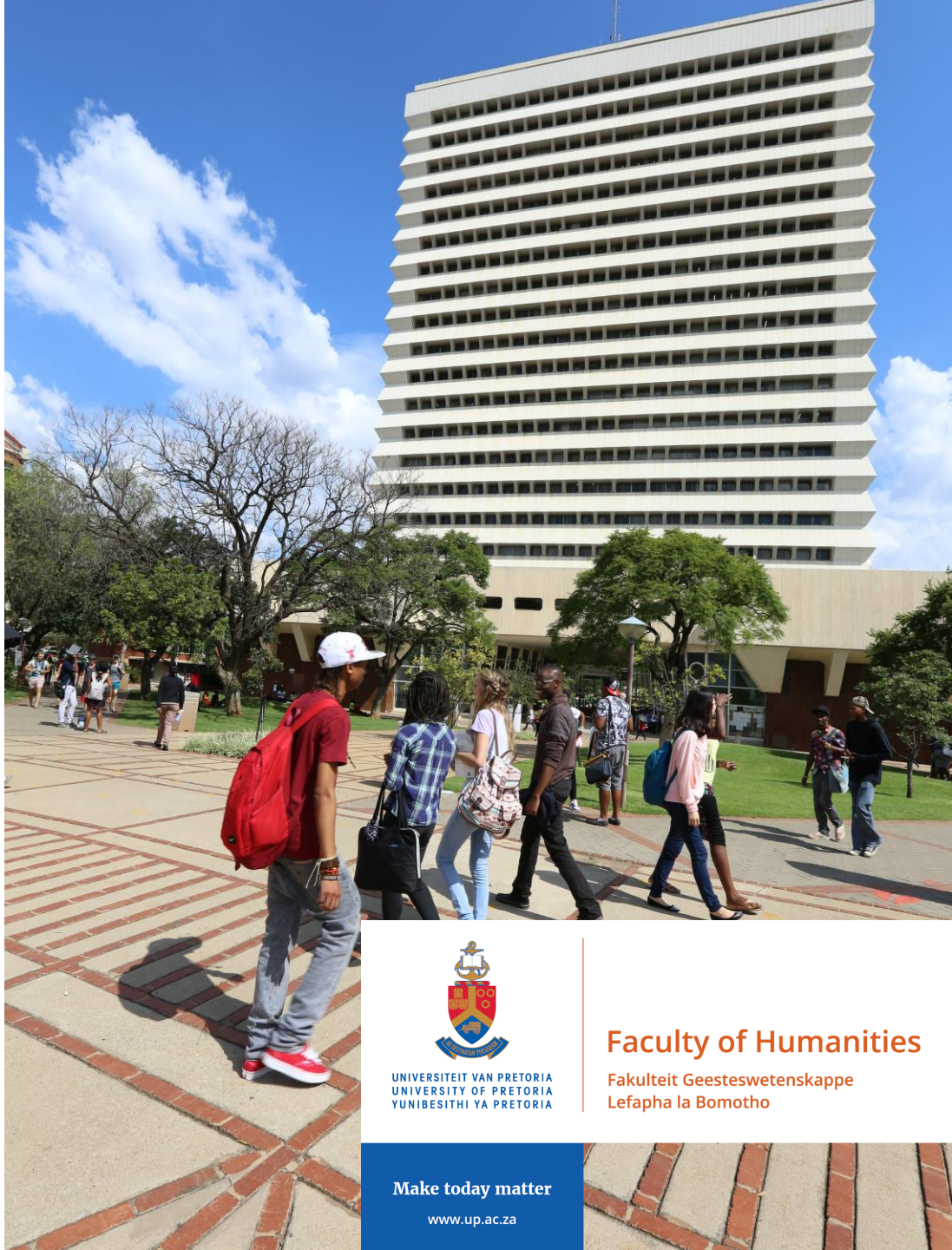
- Technology-supported services hold the possibility of shaping more ‘socially just’ practices (Wolf & Goldkind, 2016:S100).
- The training of social workers in the use of technology in practice => provide direction and guidance whether and when technology is an applicable way of providing services, indication of effectiveness, outcome measures, and methods to accommodate service user’s needs and cultural diversity (Reamer, 2019:428).
- Failure to integrate technology-based approaches into the curriculum puts social workers at risk of practicing with obsolete knowledge and skills in an increasingly cyber-active world (Dunlop and Fawcett, 2008:140) .



Hybrid practice in social work

- Advantages of utilising technology in service delivery include the promotion of unbiased and equitable service delivery, cutback in travel costs, as well as time and interruption to work commitments, diminished stigma and increased access to support and professional help (Simpson, 2009:272).

- Technology-supported services led to better efficient time management and the limitation of movement of social workers (Csoba and Diebel, 2020:1100).



Hybrid practice – research participants' responses

*"**I generally feel positive about the shift in social work from exclusively in-person services towards technology-based services** because I think there's a reason why technology has developed to the point where it has and that is to make our lives easier to **make us as human beings more effective and efficient in our dealings with one another on every conceivable level and I think social work can only benefit from that.** …..The people who sort of push social push the social profession forwards oftentimes in my engagement with the people higher up in the social work hierarchy. I haven't experienced them personally as people that are particularly adept at using technology themselves. Or people who are up to speed and up to date with the progress of technology. In the modern era that is maybe one concern that I have is…. I'm not sure how fast the social profession will be able to catch up with other professions that are technology-based. Because social workers themselves in my experience are not up to date yet with the rest of the world when it comes to technology." **(P10)***

*"Especially since **we are dealing with humans we would always have that need for personal interaction as well as then incorporating technology to make our lives easier in what we do**." **(P12)***

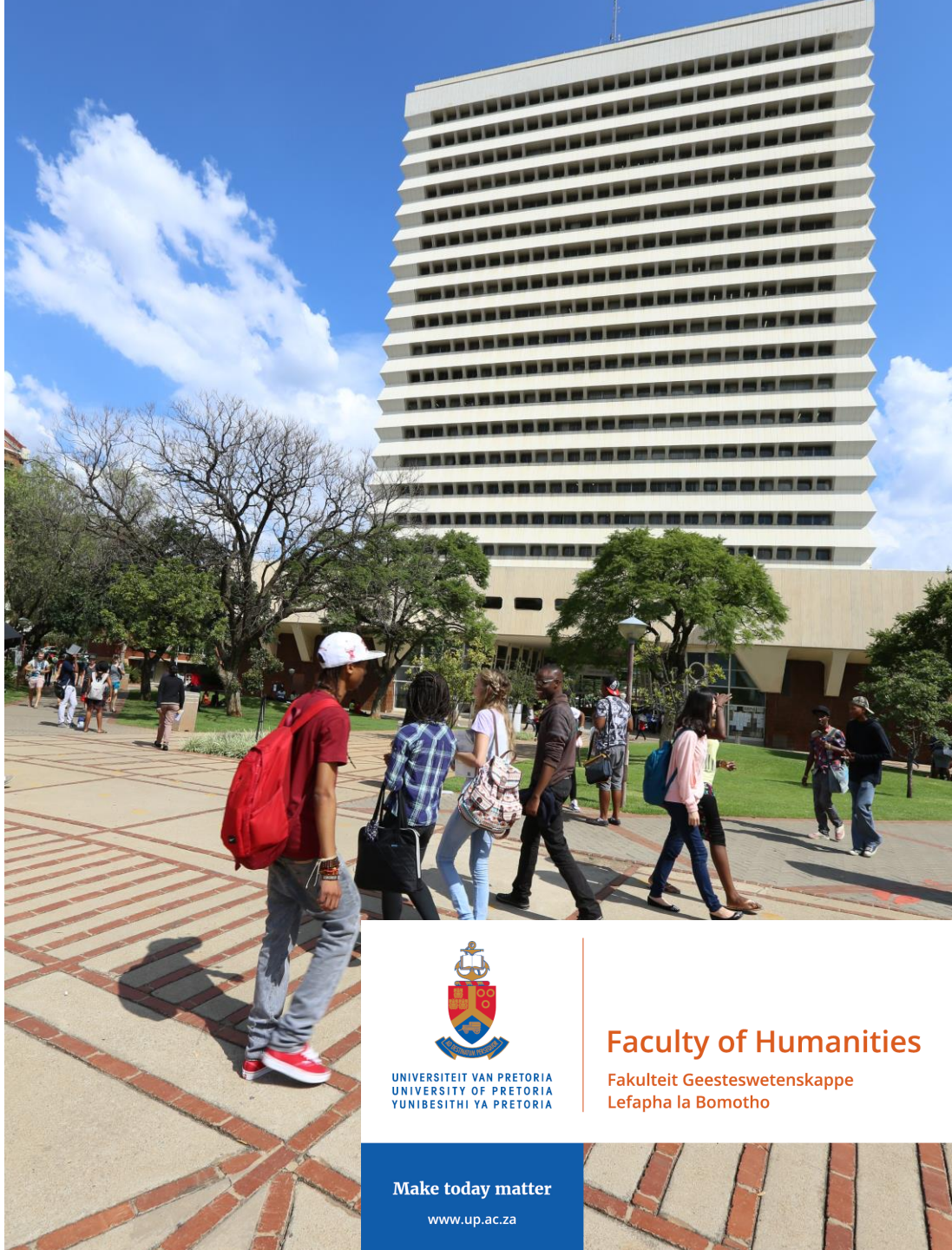
Themes emerging from research supporting a hybrid approach

- **Technology provide safety eg. Risk of hijacking**

*"…determining factors would definitely be **location**, where you are based, because in some places it's nearly impossible to have network and have great connection in terms of using technology. It would be that. It also could be the challenges they have in the communities, because in our community we do have, like I've said, we have **hijacking**." **(P7)***

- **Technology is cost saving**

*"I think definitely both are required and both well I personally feel will always….. personal contact will always be a need but technology incorporate….Incorporating technology within that either whatever the scenario is would benefit. It makes life much more easier because it makes it **less expensive**." **(P12)***



Themes emerging from research supporting a hybrid approach

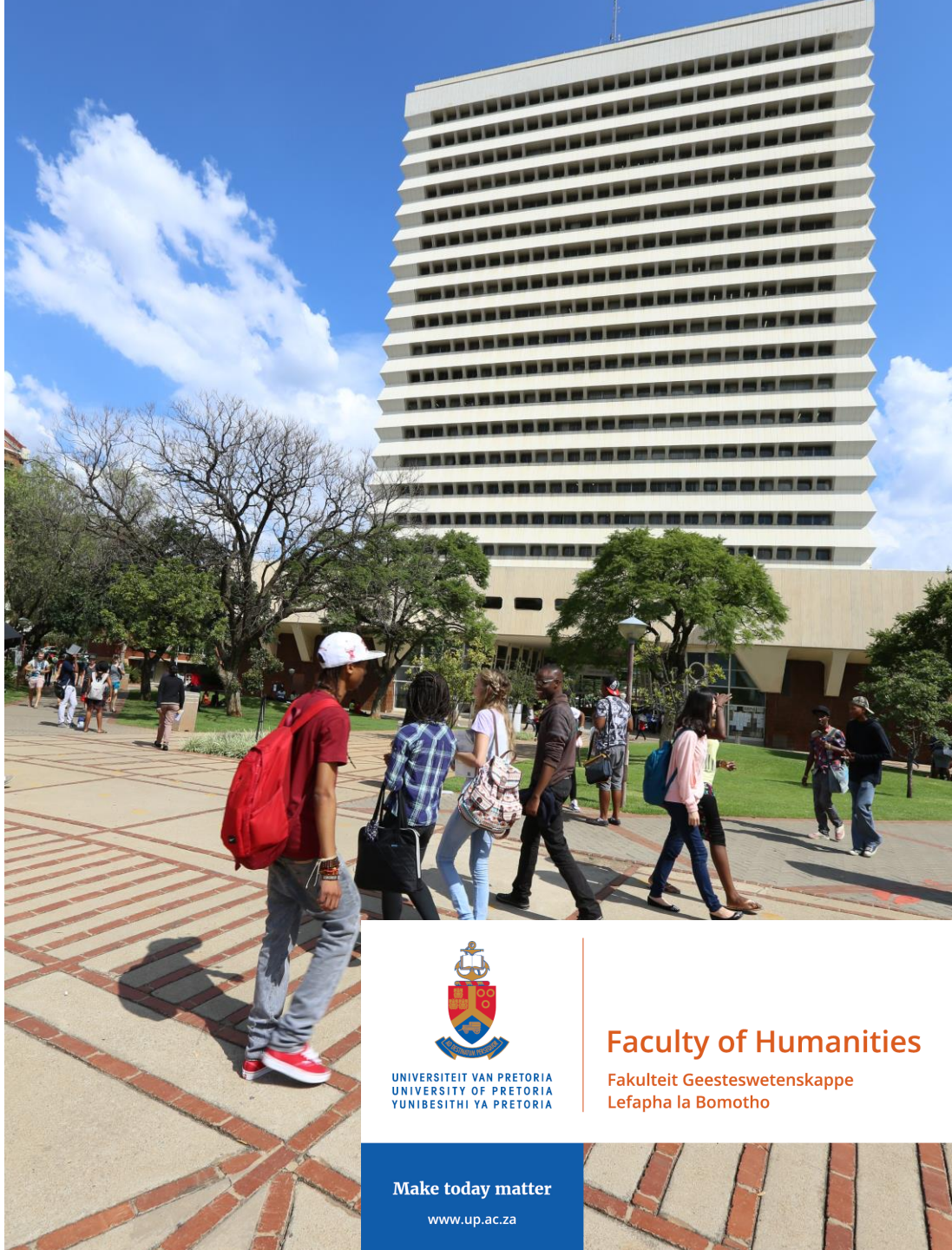
- **Technology and ethics**

*"Technology is **an ethical minefield** and I am honestly quite scared of where things are heading if we start using more technology-based services because we already have such clear guidelines for in-person service delivery that I don't think any social worker has to wonder what the ethical boundaries are but I'm not sure if the technology-based services have been as rigidly defined when it comes to ethical procedures and guidelines and legislation."* ***(P10)***

- **Client-centered approach**

*"I think in social work, a large part of it is about determining **where your clients are** and to determine what is possible for them and what they need."* ***(P16)***

*"And that's what social workers are supposed to do. It's supposed to **be there where the client** is. So I think we can't take that away completely."* ***(P9)***



Themes emerging from research supporting a hybrid approach

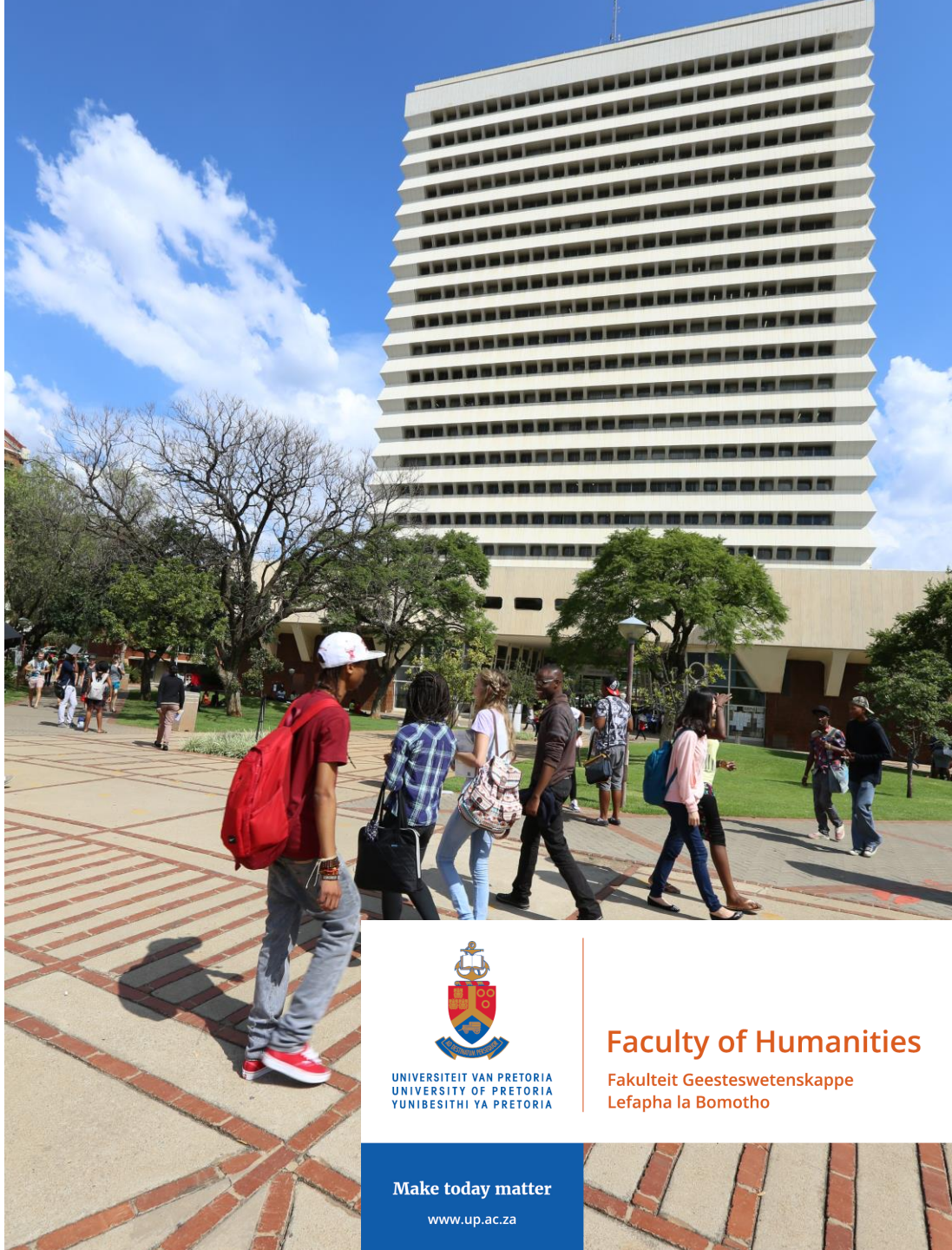
- **Loadshedding & subsequent network challenges**

*"We are **loadshedding**. It's becoming better, but back then when there was **loadshedding, then there was no network elsewhere**." **(P13)***

- **Connectivity and network issues**

*"Okay. I think the main challenge is …..if you call it the **network or the signal,** because when we use this technology, it requires a signal. So, with load shedding, it has become a very huge challenge because you might have data on your laptop, but then if you want to get into a meeting, then there is **no network**". **(P18)***

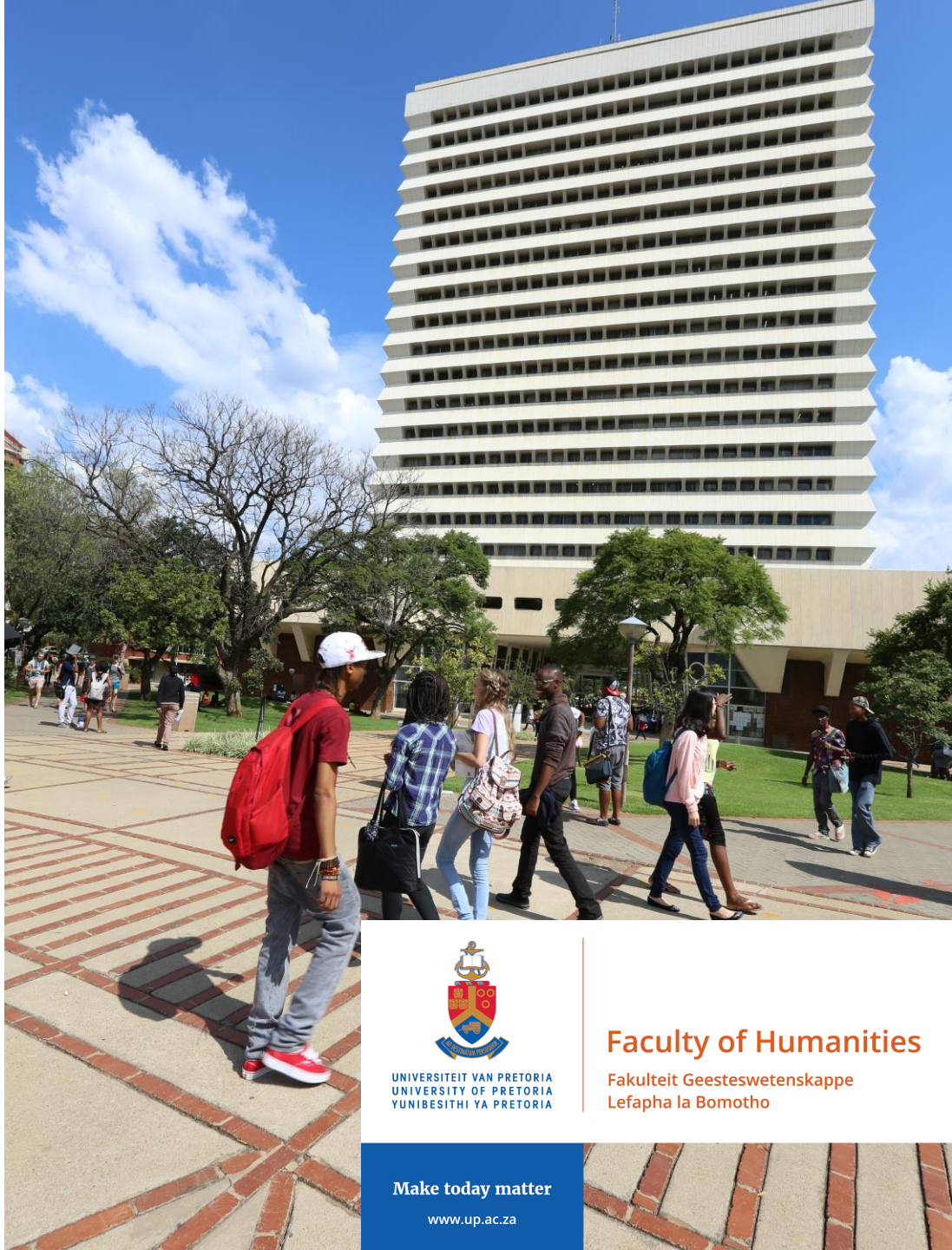
*"The challenges that we're having, it's a **network**. The network is very devastating when it comes to the rural areas" **(P6)***



Themes emerging from research supporting a hybrid approach

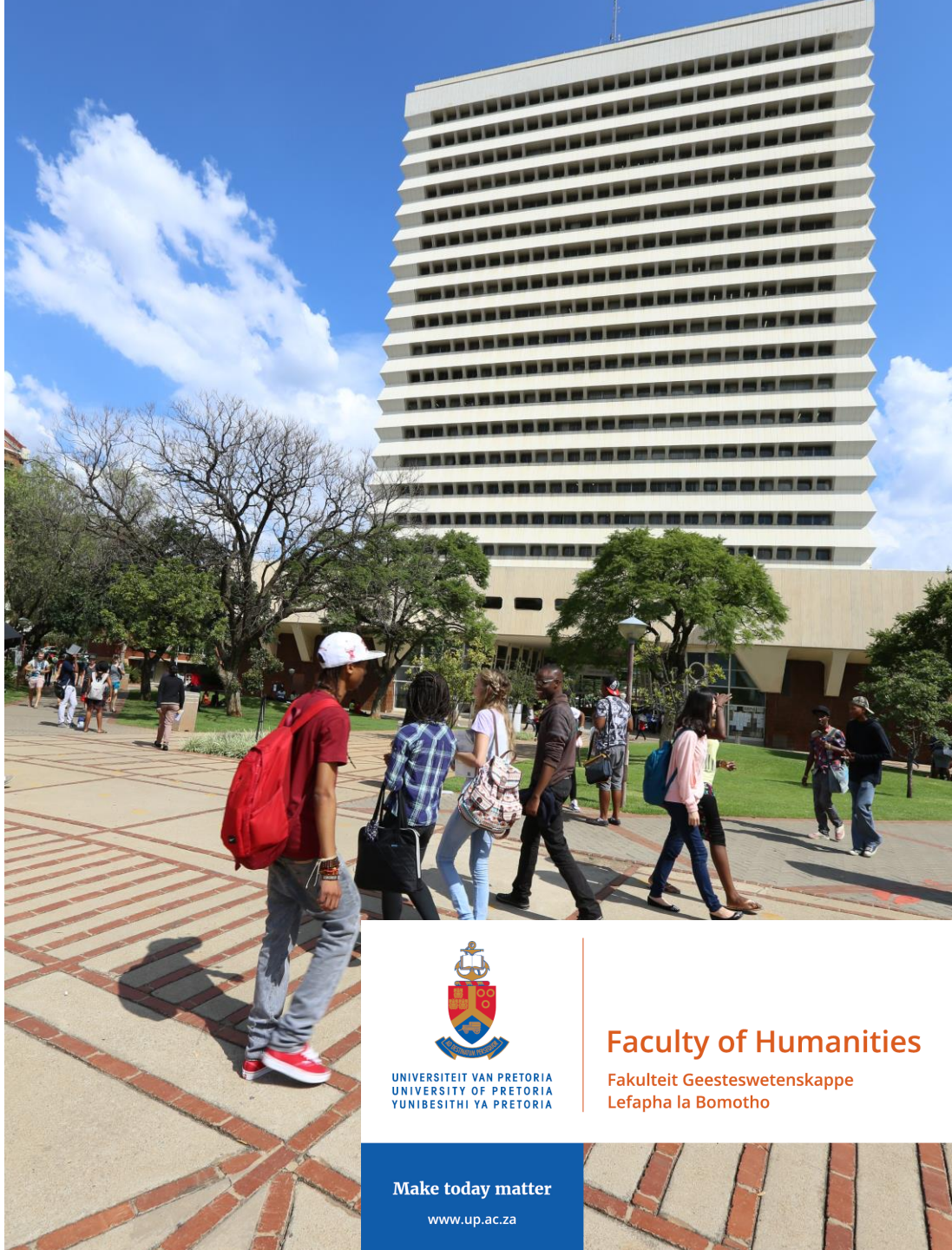
- **Safety of clients and the social worker – online mediation was successfully used**

"*There was no peace, like fighting physically, and we ended up calling police. But after the second session, we thought, no, I think the best thing is for us to* ***move online so that you are at your house****, or the mother will come to my office, the father will be at his house. It was better, although there were fights, but it was easy to control because it was not like physically, after they fought physically.* " ***(P15)***



Guideline towards a hybrid approach for social services in SA

- Inclusive
- Accessible
- Leaving no one behind
- Client centredness
- Ethical boundaries
- The process of digitalisation as a relationship with social work that is '***multi-layered, fluid and complex***' (Taylor, 2017:870).



“If social workers are competent and literate in technology, they will be able to promote the ‘standards and values of social work ethics’ in practice.

In essence a hybrid approach to social work practice shift social workers to being ***confident and empowered*** *in the world of technologies, knowing when and how to use technology-supported services, to reach more clients, and ensuring that the profession will stay relevant and inclusive in a changing digital society”* *(Perron et al., 2010:77)*

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