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Associate Professor Werner de Klerk – Community Psychosocial Research (COMPRES), Faculty of Health Sciences, North-West University, South Africa.

CORRESPONDENCE

Fazel Freeks
Fazel.Freeks@nwu.ac.za

Willem Nel
Willem.Nel@nwu.ac.za

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Research Article

Empowering the next generation: A descriptive socio-educational analysis of the "A Faculty Who Cares" community engagement initiative

Authors: Fazel Ebrihiam Freeks[1] and Willem Nel[2]

Affiliation: [1]Faculty of Theology, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa
[2]Community Psychosocial Research (COMPRES), North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa

Abstract

Universities increasingly use community engagement to support young people at key educational transition points, yet programme descriptions can overstate impact when implementation processes and evaluation limits are not made explicit. This article presents a descriptive socio-educational analysis of the North-West University Faculty of Theology initiative "A Faculty Who Cares", established in 2020 to support secondary-school learners in Potchefstroom through study-method guidance, motivational and resilience support, career guidance, and engagement with psychosocial barriers such as alcohol misuse and violence. The article combines a focused narrative review with secondary analysis of publicly available, aggregated school-level National Senior Certificate performance data and North-West University institutional reports. The literature is used to contextualise educational resilience, community engagement, adolescent alcohol use, school violence, career decision-making and interdisciplinary collaboration. Official school-performance data show marked year-to-year variation. Promosa Secondary School increased from 40.0% in 2022 to 71.6% in 2023, followed by 64.3% in 2024 and 66.3% in 2025. Potchefstroom Secondary School increased from 72.1% in 2022 to 78.6% in 2023 and 95.9% in 2024, followed by 91.8% in 2025. These trends are descriptive and cannot establish that the initiative caused the changes. The analysis nevertheless demonstrates the relevance of a structured, relational and multi-component community-engagement approach while identifying the need for prospective evaluation using learner-level psychosocial and educational outcomes.

Keywords: community engagement; educational resilience; grade 12 learners; youth empowerment; career guidance; school support

Introduction

The transition through the senior secondary-school years places learners at the intersection of examination demands and decisions about further study or employment. Research on school leavers links career indecision with emotional distress and highlights the importance of vocational and mental-health support during this transition (Amaral et al., 2023). Educational resilience also depends on the interaction between individual capacities and the support available in learners' environments (Pearson et al., 2025). These findings provide a rationale for educational support that addresses study practices, resilience and career decision-making alongside subject learning.

Against this background, the Faculty of Theology at North-West University (NWU) initiated "A Faculty Who Cares" in 2020 under the leadership of Fazel Freeks, then coordinator of community engagement in the Faculty. Public NWU descriptions of the initiative indicate that it was developed to support school learners through guidance on effective study methods, motivation, career choices, resilience, time management, communication and value-based development. The initiative has operated in partnership with Promosa Secondary School and Potchefstroom Secondary School in Potchefstroom and has also addressed concerns such as substance misuse and violence that may undermine school learners' well-being and academic functioning (Bantham, 2024; Mosiane, 2024).

The initiative is situated within a wider understanding of university community engagement as a reciprocal relationship in which academic institutions use their knowledge, human resources and networks in partnership with communities. In the South African higher-education context, community engagement has increasingly been positioned as part of the university's public and developmental responsibility rather than as an optional outreach activity (Bhagwan, 2017; Machimana et al., 2020; Saidi, 2023; Saidi & Boti, 2023). NWU's own community-engagement procedures emphasise registration, monitoring, evaluation and partnership processes as part of responsible institutional practice (NWU, n.d.).

Using annual school pass-rate trends to discuss programme contribution raises several methodological questions. Annual matric pass rates represent different learner cohorts, are affected by multiple school and contextual factors, and cannot by themselves establish causal impact. A defensible analysis must therefore distinguish clearly between programme description, literature-based rationale and empirical evidence. It must also specify where the data come from, how they were analysed and what conclusions they can and cannot support.

Accordingly, this article treats "A Faculty Who Cares" as a descriptive programme case rather than as a controlled impact evaluation. It documents the presently available implementation components, situates them within relevant literature, and analyses aggregate school-performance trends using official or public institutional sources. The article deliberately avoids attributing changes in matric results solely to the initiative and instead identifies a framework for more rigorous future evaluation.

Aim and Research Question

The aim of this article is to describe and critically interpret "A Faculty Who Cares" as a university community-engagement initiative for senior secondary-school learners, to examine the socio-educational rationale for its core components, and to describe school-level matriculation trends during the period in which the initiative has operated.

The guiding research question is: How can "A Faculty Who Cares" be described as a community-engagement model for supporting senior secondary-school learners, and what do publicly available school-level matriculation trends from 2020 to 2025 indicate about the educational context in which the initiative operates?

Methods

Research Approach and Design

The article uses a descriptive design combining documentary programme analysis, a focused narrative synthesis of relevant literature, and secondary analysis of aggregated school-level National Senior Certificate (NSC) performance data. Bowen (2009) provides methodological support for examining documents as research sources, including attention to their purpose and limitations, while Snyder (2019) discusses literature reviews as research methodologies. These sources support the documentary and literature components of the present approach; they are not presented as an established protocol named "descriptive programme analysis". The purpose is to describe the initiative, contextualise its components and examine school-performance patterns rather than to estimate a causal intervention effect.

No primary learner-level research was conducted for this article. School learners were not recruited, interviewed, surveyed or individually assessed, and no individual academic records are reported. The analysis draws on aggregate school-level examination data, published programme descriptions and an institutional community-engagement activity report. The reported event-participation totals are documentary programme records, not participant-level outcome data. School-level permission and research ethics approval are reported separately as governance arrangements. Accordingly, the article is a descriptive documentary analysis and programme reflection rather than an experimental, quasi-experimental or longitudinal cohort study.

Literature Search and Source Selection

The literature component is a focused narrative review rather than a systematic review or meta-analysis. Sources were selected purposively to clarify the main domains directly addressed by the initiative: educational resilience, community engagement, adolescent alcohol use, school violence, career uncertainty and career guidance, education as a basis for community engagement, and interdisciplinary collaboration. Preference was given to peer-reviewed research from 2020 to 2026 and to South African or African evidence where suitable studies were available. Earlier sources were retained where they were foundational to the initiative or where they addressed South African higher-education community engagement directly. Because the purpose is contextual and interpretive, no claim is made that the literature search is exhaustive.

Freeks's (2008) LIFEPLAN® facilitator manual is retained only as historical background to the educational material discussed in the initiative's development. It predates "A Faculty Who Cares" and is not used as evidence of implementation during 2020–2025 or as the principal source for current psychosocial claims. Programme implementation is described through published accounts (Bantham, 2024; Freeks, 2026; Mosiane, 2024), while contemporary research on school learners supports the discussion of alcohol use, violence and career decision-making.

Secondary Data Sources

School-performance data were drawn from publicly available Department of Basic Education (DBE) school-performance reports and NWU public communications. The DBE reports were treated as the primary source for the 2021–2025 NSC figures

because they provide school-level totals and pass percentages in a standardised national reporting format (DBE, 2024, 2025, 2026). The 2020 Promosa Secondary School pass rate of 47% is retained from NWU's public account of the initiative because the DBE series used in this analysis begins later (Mosiane, 2024).

Where NWU public communications and DBE reports contain small differences in the number of candidates or the resulting percentage, the DBE figures are used for consistency. For example, an NWU communication reported a 71.9% pass rate at Promosa Secondary School in 2023, while the DBE school-performance report records 58 of 81 candidates achieving the NSC, or 71.6%. The present article uses the DBE value. This source hierarchy is important because it ensures that the figures and graphs correspond with the written analysis.

Programme documentation also includes the Faculty of Theology Community Engagement Committee agenda of 9 September 2026 and its attached activity report for January–August 2026 (NWU, 2026). This internal institutional source lists "A Faculty Who Cares" under project number 178867480 and records learner–parent activities at both partner schools. It is used to describe institutional registration, activity content, dates and reported participation, rather than to infer learner-level change or programme effectiveness.

Data Analysis

The school-level data were analysed descriptively. Annual numbers of candidates who wrote, numbers who achieved the NSC and pass percentages were tabulated by school and year. Pass percentages were checked against the reported counts and rounded to one decimal place where counts were available. No inferential statistical tests were performed because the data represent different annual school cohorts rather than matched individuals, and the available sources do not provide learner-level covariates, comparison groups or reliable measures of programme exposure. The analysis therefore focuses on direction and year-to-year variation without treating those trends as proof of programme effectiveness.

Rigour

Rigour was strengthened by prioritising official DBE reports for school-performance figures, checking consistency between reported counts and percentages, and comparing programme descriptions across public accounts and the Faculty's community-engagement activity report. The sources serve different purposes: DBE reports provide aggregate examination results, while programme accounts and institutional activity records describe implementation and participation. These programme records reflect institutional and programme-leader perspectives rather than independent evaluations of effectiveness. Causal attribution was therefore avoided. Educational outcomes are shaped by teaching, school leadership, family and district support, cohort characteristics and wider social conditions. This descriptive analysis identifies the relationship between programme content and educational needs but cannot isolate the initiative's independent effect.

Ethical Considerations

This article uses published programme descriptions, the Faculty of Theology's institutional community-engagement activity report and publicly available, aggregated school-level NSC performance data. It does not report learner interviews, survey responses, individual academic records or other identifiable learner-level data. It also does not reproduce learner photographs or named certificates. Its documentary and secondary analysis is therefore distinct from direct research

participation by school learners in the wider community-engagement initiative.

Ethical clearance for Freeks's community-engagement research is documented in the NWU Theology Research Ethics Committee (TREC) approval letter dated 25 March 2026. The certificate records the approved research title as "A Community Engagement Project on Family Wellbeing: A Practical Theological Assessment", names Prof F. E. Freeks as project leader, and gives ethics number NWU-00881-23-A6, a minimal-risk classification and an expiry date of 24 March 2027. The approval applies to the proposal submitted to TREC and remains subject to the committee's monitoring and amendment conditions. The present article reports published programme descriptions and aggregate school-level examination results rather than newly collected learner-level data.

The family-related dimension of the initiative is documented in the Faculty's activity report, which places Grade 12 learner–parent engagement under "A Faculty Who Cares", project number 178867480. These activities address parental support, study preparation and the home–school partnership (NWU, 2026, pp. 40–41, 46–48). The documented programme therefore includes family participation and home–school support alongside learners' academic preparation.

The "A Faculty Who Cares" initiative is registered on the NWU Community Engagement database under project number 178867480, as recorded in the Faculty's Community Engagement Committee documentation (NWU, 2026, pp. 25–26). Permission was obtained from the principals of Promosa Secondary School and Potchefstroom Secondary School to implement the community-engagement activities, conduct research linked to these activities and publish research results and programme reports. This permission also extends to reporting community-engagement activities in newspapers and magazines. The school-level permissions are reported as organisational arrangements; neither these permissions nor community-engagement registration is presented as ethics-committee approval or education-department authorisation for this article.

School-level organisational permission should also be distinguished from the requirements governing identifiable information about individual school learners. The Information Regulator's guidance addresses the processing of children's personal information and the relevant consent provisions (Information Regulator, 2021). This article confines its reporting to programme descriptions and aggregate examination results. References to certificates and published programme accounts document activity and participation; they do not establish consent for reproducing identifiable learner material or demonstrate learner-level change.

Findings

"A Faculty Who Cares" as a Community-engagement Model

Programme Purpose and Documented Implementation

Public NWU descriptions and a later magazine account by Freeks indicate that "A Faculty Who Cares" was established to support Grade 12 learners at a demanding transition point by combining academic guidance with motivation, career development, resilience support and discussion of psychosocial pressures that may affect learning (Bantham, 2024; Freeks, 2026; Mosiane, 2024). The initiative is delivered through recurring school-based engagement with Promosa Secondary School and Potchefstroom Secondary School. Documentary reports further describe attention to effective study habits, meaningful goal-setting, informed career choices, substance misuse, violence, peer pressure and uncertainty about the future. Although the available documentation does not specify a fixed annual number or duration of sessions, it provides a clearer account of

the programme's recurring content and collaborative mode of delivery. Table 1 summarises the documented implementation framework.

The Faculty's 2026 activity report provides two dated illustrations of implementation. At Potchefstroom Secondary School, a Grade 12 parent meeting and discussion of first-quarter results took place on 18 April 2026, with a reported 250 participants including learners and parents. At Promosa Secondary School, a learner–parent accountability session took place on 14 May 2026; the report lists 31 learners and parents as participants. Its content included respect for differences, teamwork, individual strengths and goal-setting, alongside learner motivation, study strategies and the home–school partnership (NWU, 2026, pp. 40–41, 46–48). These records document participation and programme content in 2026; they do not establish changes in individual outcomes or effects on the 2020–2025 examination trends.

Table 1

Documented Implementation Framework for "A Faculty Who Cares"

Implementation Question	Current Documented Description
Why?	To strengthen school learners' academic preparation, motivation, resilience and informed post-school decision-making while addressing selected social barriers that can disrupt learning.
Who?	Fazel Freeks leads the initiative through the NWU Faculty of Theology, working with school leadership and teachers. Grade 12 learners are a central focus; NWU public reporting also describes Grades 10 to 12. The 2026 activity report documents parent involvement at both partner schools (Bantham, 2024; Mosiane, 2024; NWU, 2026).
Where?	Promosa Secondary School and Potchefstroom Secondary School in Potchefstroom, North West province.
When?	The initiative began in 2020. The 2026 institutional report records a learner–parent meeting at Potchefstroom Secondary on 18 April and a learner–parent session at Promosa Secondary on 14 May. A complete annual implementation log is not provided. The NSC trend analysis covers 2020–2025 for Promosa and 2021–2025 for Potchefstroom Secondary.
What?	Study methods; motivation and encouragement; resilience; communication; meaningful goal-setting; career guidance and career-choice reflection; value-based development; and educational discussion of substance misuse, violence, peer pressure and uncertainty about the future.
How?	School-based study-method guidance, motivation and career-development activities are undertaken with school leadership and teachers. Documented 2026 activities also include learner–parent meetings and work on the home–school partnership. The available records do not specify a standard session sequence, complete annual session count or duration.
Intended outcomes	Improved study practices and preparedness, stronger learner confidence and resilience, more informed career choices, and improved readiness for matriculation and post-school opportunities.
Evaluation gap	Programme records document activity, school collaboration, selected dates and combined learner–parent participation totals. These are implementation records rather than direct learner-level outcome measures. Individual programme exposure, a complete delivery schedule and prospective outcome evaluation are not reported.

The framework describes an integration of academic study support, motivational and resilience-oriented encouragement, career development and school–university partnership. Published accounts describe recurring engagement with Grade 12 learners, collaboration with school leadership and teachers, and recognition of participation through certificates of merit at Potchefstroom Secondary School (Bantham, 2024; Freeks, 2026). No learner photographs or identifiable certificates are reproduced or analysed in this article. The documentation does not establish a fixed session sequence, frequency or duration. These implementation details should be recorded consistently across programme cycles before the initiative is presented as a fully specified, replicable intervention.

Resilience, Study Support and Learner Agency

Educational resilience is particularly relevant to the initiative because Grade 12 learners are required to sustain effort under significant academic and social pressure. Pearson et al. (2025) describe resilience in educational settings as context-dependent rather than as a fixed personal trait. Resilience develops through interaction between school learner capacities and the support available in families, schools and communities. Farchi and Peled-Avram (2025) similarly conceptualise resilience as a dynamic process in which personal coping resources interact with external support, enabling school learners to respond more flexibly to challenge.

This perspective provides a rationale for integrating study support with psychosocial and career guidance. Self-regulated learning links goal-setting, the use of learning strategies and reflection on progress (Zimmerman, 2002), while research on high-school career interventions identifies self-knowledge, career information and decision-making as recurring areas of support (Wang et al., 2024). In "A Faculty Who Cares", these domains are brought together through study-method guidance, encouragement and career reflection. The proposed contribution is additional support during the school-leaving transition; the present analysis does not establish that the programme has changed learners' study behaviour, resilience or career decisions.

We interpret the initiative's themes of discipline, respect, courage and purpose as educational aspirations concerned with learner agency. Goal-setting, strategy use and self-reflection can be situated within self-regulated learning (Zimmerman, 2002), while resilience scholarship emphasises both personal resources and contextual support (Pearson et al., 2025). This interpretation does not treat poor academic performance as a failure of character or imply that these values were measured as school learner outcomes.

From Programme Activities to Evaluable Outcomes

Programme-evaluation guidance distinguishes inputs, activities, outputs and intended outcomes, and recommends making their relationships explicit (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024). Applied here, delivering study-method guidance is an activity, attendance is an immediate output, improved strategy use is a possible short-term outcome, and academic progression is a possible longer-term outcome. The same distinction applies to psychosocial support. A resilience or career-guidance session documents an activity; demonstrating change requires corresponding outcome measures. The examples below are proposed evaluation indicators, not findings from the current article.

A future evaluation could align each component with indicators derived from its intended purpose. Study-method support could be assessed through study routines, planning, strategy use and task completion, drawing on self-regulated learning (Zimmerman, 2002). Resilience support could be assessed using measures appropriate to school learners' educational context (Pearson et al., 2025). Career guidance could be assessed through career decision-making self-efficacy, career adaptability and clarity of post-school plans, outcomes considered in high-school intervention research (Wang et al., 2024). For sessions addressing alcohol misuse and violence, knowledge, help-seeking intentions and perceived access to support could serve as initial indicators. These latter indicators are proposed by the authors; they do not imply that knowledge gains alone demonstrate behavioural change. Measure selection and local suitability would need to be established within an approved prospective evaluation.

The school partnership itself should also be evaluated. Teachers and school leaders can provide information on the fit between programme content and school needs, scheduling feasibility, learner participation and areas requiring adaptation.

School learner feedback can identify which components are experienced as useful, repetitive or difficult to apply. These data would create a feedback loop in which the initiative is refined with the schools rather than delivered to them as a fixed external package. Such reciprocal evaluation is consistent with community-engagement scholarship that treats community partners as contributors to knowledge and programme development (Bhagwan, 2017; Machimana et al., 2020).

This approach would also make interdisciplinary expansion more manageable. Instead of inviting additional faculties to contribute isolated presentations, each discipline could be linked to a defined school learner need and outcome indicator. The result would be a coherent programme architecture in which expertise is integrated around learner development, while the school retains a central role in identifying priorities and judging practical value.

Socio-educational Barriers Addressed by the Initiative

NWU's public description of "A Faculty Who Cares" states that the initiative engages school learners on substance misuse, violence and career choices because these issues can affect academic functioning and future decision-making (Bantham, 2024). These themes are therefore not included as general social commentary; they form part of the programme rationale. The following sections briefly synthesise recent evidence to explain why each issue is relevant to senior secondary-school learners.

Alcohol Use and Academic Functioning

South African evidence identifies alcohol use as a relevant concern among high-school learners. In a cross-sectional study of 403 school learners in Tshwane North and West, Mathibe et al. (2022) reported easy access to alcohol and found that school learners associated its use with health problems, impaired brain functioning, difficulties with schoolwork, conflict and physical fights. These findings concern secondary-school learners in a South African context; they are not presented as findings about the school learners at the two partner schools.

International longitudinal evidence also indicates that alcohol use can be associated with educational outcomes. Hjarnaa et al. (2023), using a cohort of more than 65,000 adolescents, found a dose-related association between alcohol intake and lower grade-point average and also examined school dropout. Although the context differs from South Africa and causality remains complex, the study supports the educational relevance of alcohol-use prevention and early intervention. Varghese and Dakhode's (2022) systematic review further summarises the broader physiological and cognitive effects of alcohol, including impairment that can affect concentration, judgement and functioning.

For the present initiative, the strongest educational rationale is therefore not to provide an exhaustive account of alcoholism or adult family consequences. Rather, it is to help school learners recognise how alcohol use can interfere with concentration, study routines, decision-making, relationships, safety and school participation. This age-appropriate focus is more closely aligned with the programme's purpose and avoids extending the discussion into adult clinical consequences that are peripheral to the article.

School and Community Violence

Violence is similarly relevant because unsafe school and community environments can undermine concentration, attendance, psychological well-being and academic engagement. Lumadi (2024) reports that school violence in South African secondary schools can disrupt learner participation and educational functioning. More recent African evidence strengthens this point. Lupindo et al. (2025), in a systematic review of studies involving adolescents exposed to community or school violence in

Africa, found negative consequences across psychological, social, behavioural and academic domains and highlighted the protective importance of social support and school climate.

The educational implication for "A Faculty Who Cares" is that discussions of violence should be linked to practical psychosocial skills: recognising harmful behaviour, communicating constructively, seeking help, resolving conflict non-violently and strengthening supportive peer and adult relationships. Such content does not replace formal safeguarding or school disciplinary systems. Its contribution is educational and preventive, helping school learners identify risks and practise responses that support a safer learning environment.

Career Uncertainty and Post-school Transition

Career uncertainty is directly connected to the Grade 12 transition. Evidence focused on school learners is more directly relevant than research involving university students. Amaral et al. (2023), in a scoping review focused on the transition from high school, found that career indecision was associated with negative thinking, depressive symptoms and lower self-efficacy, while more decided learners tended to report more positive affect and well-being. The authors argue for integrated vocational and mental-health support during the school-leaving years.

Research on career interventions also supports structured guidance. Wang et al. (2024) reviewed career interventions for high-school learners and found that programmes commonly aim to improve career adaptability and decision-making, often through group counselling and structured career-development activities. More recent research with senior high-school learners further indicates that career decision-making self-efficacy is associated with lower career anxiety and that social and situational support can matter during the transition to higher education (Söner & Yılmaz, 2025).

The high-school intervention literature supports attention to self-knowledge, career information and decision-making, while the school-leaver literature links career uncertainty with emotional well-being (Amaral et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2024). These findings provide a rationale for guidance that helps school learners consider their interests and realistic post-school pathways. Applied to the present initiative, we argue that career guidance should remain learner-centred and encompass a range of study, training and employment options, rather than being evaluated solely through recruitment to NWU.

Education as a Foundation for Community Engagement

Community engagement in higher education is most defensible when it moves beyond one-directional outreach and creates reciprocal relationships between universities and communities. Bhagwan (2017) argues for a conceptualisation of community engagement that integrates academic work with societal needs, while Machimana et al. (2020) emphasise engagement as a space for co-generating knowledge and mobilising community assets. In this framing, communities are not passive recipients of university expertise but partners whose local knowledge and priorities shape meaningful engagement.

This is especially important in educational partnerships. Schools have their own leadership, teachers, curricula, learner-support structures and accountability systems. A university initiative should therefore complement rather than displace those structures. Public NWU reporting on "A Faculty Who Cares" documents collaboration with the principals and teachers at both participating schools (Bantham, 2024). This is consistent with the reciprocal orientation expected in community engagement. The partnership becomes stronger when the school identifies needs, the university contributes relevant expertise, and both parties participate in monitoring whether activities are useful and sustainable.

Saidi (2023) notes that community engagement in South African universities can remain institutionally marginal when it lacks stable leadership, funding, recognition and evaluation. Saidi and Boti (2023) similarly position community engagement within the "third mission" of the university, linking teaching and research to public and developmental responsibilities. These arguments are relevant to the current initiative because expansion across faculties should be accompanied by clearer institutionalisation, documented outcomes and resource planning rather than relying solely on the commitment of individual champions.

Taken together, this literature provides a rationale for education as a platform connecting university resources with community priorities. South African community-engagement scholarship emphasises reciprocity and shared knowledge development (Bhagwan, 2017; Machimana et al., 2020; Saidi & Boti, 2023), while high-school career-intervention research supports structured attention to school learners' future pathways (Wang et al., 2024). In this article, the proposed contribution is additional capacity within an existing school community. Whether that contribution produces measurable educational benefits requires direct evaluation.

Descriptive School-level Matriculation Trends, 2020–2025

The annual NSC data describe the educational context in which the initiative operates. Each annual percentage represents a different Grade 12 cohort, and pass rates are influenced by factors beyond the initiative. Table 2 presents the counts and percentages used in the analysis; Figures 1 and 2 visualise the same percentages. These school-level trends are contextual indicators and are not direct measures of programme impact.

Table 2

School-level NSC Counts and Pass Percentages Used in the Analysis

School	Year	Wrote	Achieved NSC	Pass rate
Promosa Secondary	2020	—	—	47.0%
Promosa Secondary	2021	142	64	45.1%
Promosa Secondary	2022	155	62	40.0%
Promosa Secondary	2023	81	58	71.6%
Promosa Secondary	2024	112	72	64.3%
Promosa Secondary	2025	89	59	66.3%
Potchefstroom Secondary	2021	87	65	74.7%
Potchefstroom Secondary	2022	68	49	72.1%
Potchefstroom Secondary	2023	84	66	78.6%
Potchefstroom Secondary	2024	73	70	95.9%
Potchefstroom Secondary	2025	97	89	91.8%

Note. The 2020 percentage is reported by Mosiane (2024); corresponding candidate counts are not supplied in that account. The 2021–2025 counts and percentages come from DBE school-performance reports (2024, 2025, 2026). Each year represents a different school cohort.

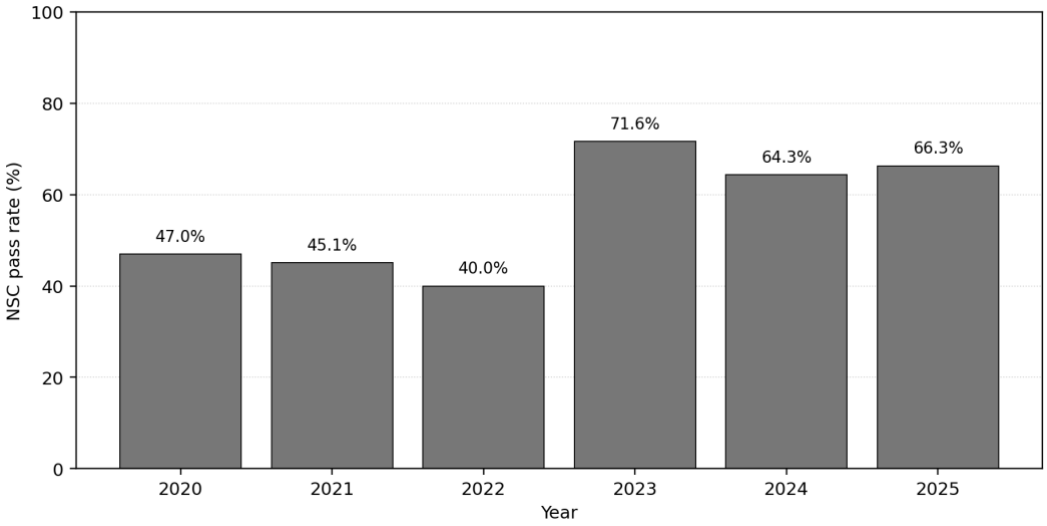
Promosa Secondary School

Promosa Secondary School has experienced substantial year-to-year variation in matric performance. NWU publicly reported a 47% pass rate in 2020 (Mosiane, 2024). Official DBE data record 45.1% in 2021, when 64 of 142 candidates achieved the NSC, and 40.0% in 2022, when 62 of 155 achieved. The pass rate then increased markedly to 71.6% in 2023, with 58 of 81 candidates achieving, before declining to 64.3% in 2024 (72 of 112) and increasing modestly to 66.3% in 2025 (59 of 89) (DBE, 2024, 2025, 2026).

The 2023 increase is educationally important, but the subsequent variation demonstrates why causal attribution should be avoided. The trend is compatible with the possibility that learner-support initiatives form part of a wider support environment, but it does not isolate the effect of "A Faculty Who Cares" from district support, school leadership, teaching, attendance, cohort characteristics or other interventions. A more rigorous evaluation would need learner-level exposure data and comparison or baseline measures. Figure 1 presents the annual NSC pass-rate trend for Promosa Secondary School from 2020 to 2025.

Figure 1

Promosa Secondary School NSC Pass Rates, 2020–2025



Note. 2020 value from Mosiane (2024); 2021–2025 values from DBE school-performance reports (2024, 2025, 2026).

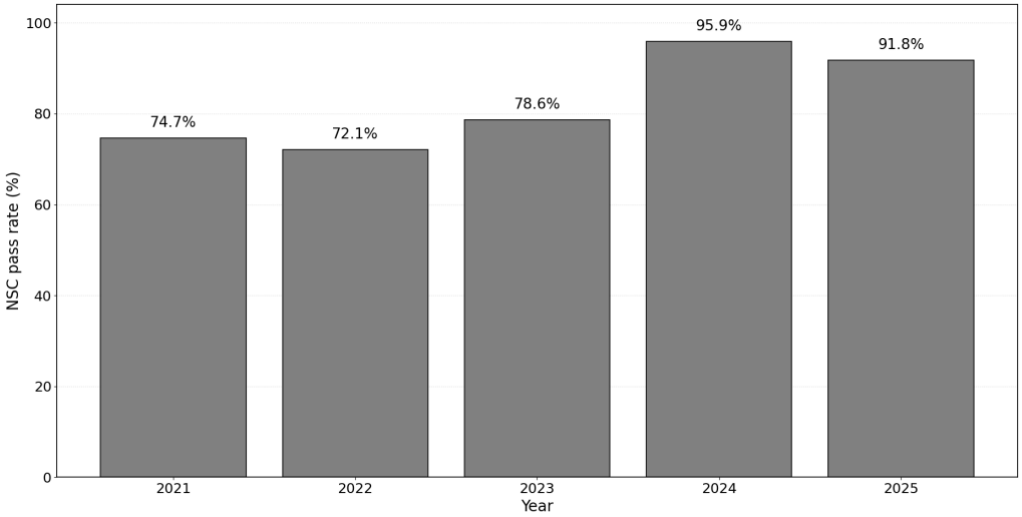
Potchefstroom Secondary School

Potchefstroom Secondary School began the period from a higher baseline. DBE data show that 65 of 87 candidates achieved the NSC in 2021, producing a 74.7% pass rate. This declined slightly to 72.1% in 2022 (49 of 68), increased to 78.6% in 2023 (66 of 84), rose sharply to 95.9% in 2024 (70 of 73), and remained high at 91.8% in 2025 (89 of 97) (DBE, 2024, 2025, 2026).

These results show a strong recent performance pattern, especially in 2024 and 2025. As with Promosa, however, the figures do not establish which intervention or combination of factors produced the change. The appropriate conclusion is that the school achieved markedly stronger NSC outcomes during the later years of the initiative period, not that the initiative alone caused those outcomes. Figure 2 presents the annual NSC pass-rate trend for Potchefstroom Secondary School from 2021 to 2025.

Figure 2

Potchefstroom Secondary School NSC Pass Rates, 2021–2025



Note. Values from DBE school-performance reports (2024, 2025, 2026).

What the Performance Evidence Can and Cannot Show

The performance evidence shows changing annual outcomes at both schools and provides aggregate indicators that could be tracked alongside future programme activity. Published accounts also document school collaboration and recognition of learner participation through certificates of merit (Bantham, 2024; Freeks, 2026). These accounts provide evidence of activity, rather than measured change in resilience, study behaviour, career decision-making, attendance, learner confidence or university application outcomes attributable to the initiative. No identifiable learner material from these accounts is reproduced or used as outcome data.

This limitation should be treated as a design opportunity. Future cycles could use brief pre- and post-session measures, attendance records, learner feedback, career-decision self-efficacy measures, study-practice checklists and follow-up information on post-school applications or enrolment, subject to appropriate ethical and organisational approval. These measures would provide evidence beyond marks and would allow the psychosocial aims of the initiative to be evaluated directly rather than inferred from school pass rates.

Strategic Growth and Interdisciplinary Collaboration

The initiative's stated vision includes collaboration with other NWU faculties and expansion to additional schools. Interdisciplinary collaboration is relevant because the challenges faced by senior secondary-school learners span educational, psychosocial, health, career and social domains. Visscher-Voerman et al. (2025) describe interdisciplinarity as the integration of knowledge and skills from different fields around complex problems, while Podgórska and Zdonek (2023) emphasise its value in higher education for addressing authentic societal challenges and strengthening connections between universities and communities.

For "A Faculty Who Cares", interdisciplinary expansion should therefore be purpose-driven rather than symbolic. Psychology or psychosocial-health expertise could strengthen resilience and well-being components; education specialists could refine study and learning strategies; career-development expertise could improve vocational guidance; health sciences could contribute evidence-based substance-use prevention; and other faculties could expose school learners to a wider range

of study and professional pathways. The benefit lies in integrating complementary expertise around learner needs rather than merely increasing the number of participating units.

Effective collaboration also requires coordination. West et al. (2016) identify shared goals, trust, communication, leadership and supportive structures as important features of interdisciplinary work. Llorca et al. (2025) similarly stress that cross-sector collaboration is most effective when institutional support connects with bottom-up engagement and civil-society participation. Applied to the present initiative, this suggests a clear coordinating structure, agreed roles with school partners, a common programme logic and shared evaluation indicators.

Discussion

The analysis suggests that the principal strength of "A Faculty Who Cares" is its integrated understanding of learner support. The initiative combines practical academic guidance with motivation, resilience, career development and attention to social risks. The literature reviewed in this article supports the relevance of each of these domains. Educational resilience is strengthened by supportive contexts; adolescent alcohol use can affect school functioning; exposure to violence can undermine psychosocial and academic adjustment; and career uncertainty during the school-leaving years can be associated with distress and lower self-efficacy (Amaral et al., 2023; Hjarnaa et al., 2023; Lupindo et al., 2025; Mathibe et al., 2022; Pearson et al., 2025).

The community-engagement dimension is equally important. The initiative is not situated outside the school but within a partnership with school leadership and teachers. This is more consistent with contemporary approaches to engaged scholarship than a one-directional expert model. The university contributes access to expertise, mentoring and exposure to higher education, while schools provide contextual knowledge, learner access and continuity. The model is therefore potentially transferable, but transferability depends on describing the process in sufficient detail.

The multi-year pass-rate trends provide a useful but limited outcome context. Promosa Secondary School's sharp increase in 2023 and Potchefstroom Secondary School's high performance in 2024 and 2025 are noteworthy. However, the available design cannot determine how much, if any, of these changes are attributable to the initiative. This is not a weakness that should be concealed through stronger rhetoric. On the contrary, explicitly separating descriptive trends from causal evidence strengthens the credibility of the article and provides a more defensible basis for future research.

Further development could make the programme's theory of change explicit by linking resources, activities, outputs and intended outcomes (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024). University and school partnerships, facilitators and materials would be inputs; study-method guidance, resilience support and career guidance would be activities; attendance would be an output; changes in study behaviour and career self-efficacy would be proposed short-term outcomes; and academic progression or successful post-school transition would be proposed longer-term outcomes. Such a framework would clarify what needs to be measured without implying that these pathways or effects have already been demonstrated.

Recommendations and Limitations

Several recommendations follow from the analysis. First, the initiative should continue to be documented as a structured but adaptable programme, with a clear annual cycle, session objectives, facilitator responsibilities, duration, frequency and core materials recorded where possible. Second, the existing NWU Community Engagement registration and established school

partnerships should remain part of the programme's governance and documentation. Third, evaluation should extend beyond annual pass rates to include direct educational and psychosocial outcomes that correspond to the initiative's stated aims. Fourth, interdisciplinary expansion should be organised around identified learner needs and a shared programme logic rather than around institutional participation alone.

This descriptive analysis has several limitations. It draws on public programme accounts, an internal institutional activity report, a focused rather than systematic literature review, and aggregate school-level examination data. The programme records communicate institutional and programme-leader perspectives rather than independent evaluations. The review is purposive and does not include a reproducible database-search log or formal risk-of-bias assessment. Although the 2026 report supplies selected event dates, content and participation totals, it does not provide a complete session schedule, individual attendance or exposure records, a comparison group, or direct measures of resilience, study behaviour and career decision-making. Annual examination cohorts differ, making pass-rate comparisons vulnerable to cohort and contextual effects. Consequently, no causal claim about programme effectiveness can be made.

A future prospective study could address these limitations through a mixed-method design. Quantitative measures could assess study practices, resilience, career decision-making self-efficacy and academic indicators before and after programme exposure. Qualitative interviews or focus groups with school learners, teachers and facilitators could examine perceived usefulness, implementation quality and contextual barriers. A comparison across participating and non-participating schools or across differing levels of programme exposure could further strengthen causal inference, provided that ethical requirements for research involving minors are fully addressed.

Conclusion

"A Faculty Who Cares" represents a promising form of university community engagement because it recognises that academic success during the senior secondary-school years is connected to study behaviour, psychosocial resilience, career decision-making and the social environment in which school learners live and learn. The initiative's documented components respond to concerns that are supported by contemporary educational and psychosocial literature, and its partnership with local schools illustrates how a university can contribute expertise and mentoring within an existing educational community.

The school-level NSC trends from 2020 to 2025 show important changes in performance at the two partner schools, including strong later-year results at Potchefstroom Secondary School and substantial, though variable, improvement at Promosa Secondary School after 2022. These figures should be interpreted as contextual indicators rather than as proof of programme impact. The initiative is formally registered within NWU Community Engagement and is supported by public documentation of collaboration with the two schools, programme activity and learner participation. The strongest next step is therefore not to make a larger causal claim, but to strengthen implementation documentation and direct outcome evaluation. With clearer programme specification, direct learner-level outcomes and prospective monitoring, "A Faculty Who Cares" could develop from a valuable community-engagement initiative into a more rigorously evidenced and potentially replicable model for youth educational support.

Conflict of Interest

Willem Nel is affiliated with Community Psychosocial Research (COMPRES), which hosts the Journal of Community Psychosocial Research. This affiliation is disclosed for transparency. The authors declare no other conflicts of interest.

Author Contributions

Fazel Ebrihiam Freeks led the conceptualisation of the initiative and article, programme documentation and substantive content development. Willem Nel contributed to methodological framing, manuscript integration and editorial revision. Both authors contributed to manuscript development.

Fazel Ebrihiam Freeks - ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2474-8756

Willem Nel - ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8962-049X

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Data Availability

The aggregate school-performance data discussed in this article are available in the cited public DBE reports and NWU news accounts. Programme documentation additionally draws on the Faculty of Theology's internal Community Engagement Committee agenda and attached activity report of 9 September 2026. That internal document is distinct from the publicly accessible examination-data sources. No learner-level dataset was created or reported for this article.

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