

## AWARDS, HONOURS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

- Award of one of only two Centres of Excellence in the Social Sciences by, National Research Foundation (2014)
- Stals Prize for Inter and Multidisciplinary Research (2000) & Stals Prize for Contribution to Research Methodology in South Africa, from the Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns (2007)
- *How to Succeed in Master's and Doctoral Studies* (2000) sold more than 30 000 copies and been cited more than 4 500 times

## DEFINING MOMENT

This occurred in 1972 when he met his wife in a psychology class. They have been together ever since.

## WHAT PEOPLE MIGHT NOT KNOW

"For two years of my life I played in the Potchefstroom Symphony Orchestra. I played drums and cymbals. I then realised how important the director of orchestra is. I see my job at the Centre for Research on Evaluation, Science and Technology as being like an orchestra director – making sure we are all on the same script and going in the same direction."

## FROM PLATO TO POLICY: A QUEST FOR BETTER KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS

"Knowledge is justified true opinion." When Plato uttered those profound words so many years ago, he could not possibly have known what an impact they would have on the Western world of the 21st century. And he certainly wouldn't have thought of the inspiration his words would give to researchers like Johann Mouton, whose life path shifted forever upon reading Plato's treatise on opinion, truth and knowledge, *Thaetetus*, in his undergraduate philosophy class.

"When I went to Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education, now North-West University in 1973, I was going to study theology, even though my aptitude tests had all pointed towards science," says Mouton. "In the second-year philosophy class, we read Plato's treatise on knowledge and how to distinguish between truth and opinion. I fell in love with epistemology and the philosophy of science." Both his master's and doctorate in philosophy

at the former Rand Afrikaans University, now University of Johannesburg (UJ) studied the nature of knowledge production.

"I am interested in the nature of knowledge and the differences we can see between scientific knowledge and other types of knowledge," he explains. In South Africa, an important consideration is indigenous sources of knowledge and how it is treated by researchers and the public. "Not to say other sources of knowledge are not important, but what distinguishes scientific knowledge is the principles of reasoning and the methodologies we use," says Mouton. "When we make claims about the world, can we provide sufficiently strong evidence? That depends to a large extent on the methods that underpin these claims. The scientific endeavour is all about the search for truth, even if we don't reach it."

After several years at RAU, in 1983 Mouton was invited to join the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) by the then President Johan Garbers, to set up a centre for research methodology to help advance social science methods in South Africa.

## NATIONAL INVESTIGATION INTO RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Mouton says that his biggest contribution during that time was conducting a national investigation into research methodology. The initiative funded and supported more than 80 research methodology projects in social sciences across South Africa and led to a number of unexpected spin-offs. "We produced more than 40 books in less than ten years," he says. "In 1987, the Universities of Limpopo and Venda asked me to start a winter school in research methodology, leading to more than a decade of capacity building there. It was particularly meaningful to me because at that time of high tension, it was unheard of for historically disadvantaged universities to work with the HSRC."

Those winter schools were South Africa's first practical training courses in research methods, teaching researchers practical skills like how to design studies and select a sample population. Mouton's influence even reached undergraduate teaching at the time: "I got universities to redesign undergraduate curricula on research methods."



In the early 1990s, Mouton started to work with international researchers on improving monitoring and evaluation (M&E) methods in South Africa, which were lagging behind international standards. "We invited top international scholars to help us improve our M&E – you can't simply transpose international methods, but we needed their help." Mouton explains that M&E is a critical component of modern society, particularly in the context of development, aid and other humanitarian efforts. It also plays an important role in keeping governments accountable, something that is desperately needed in the modern era. "M&E provides accountability for public and private funds," he points out. "Huge amounts of money is invested in social interventions every year, whether it is in health, education or government service delivery. These organisations need to be accountable to taxpayers, philanthropists or boards of trustees to show how that money was spent."

In 1994, he accepted a position at Stellenbosch University (SU) as Professor of Sociology and established the Centre for Research on Evaluation, Science and Technology (CREST), where he is Director. One of his first tasks was to create two master's programmes: one on Social Science Methods and one on Science and Technology Studies. Both were the first of their kind in the country. "Over those years at CREST, we developed the biggest academic programme in M&E in Africa. We graduated over 600 students from across the African continent. M&E should form part of the democratic ethos of society," he maintains.

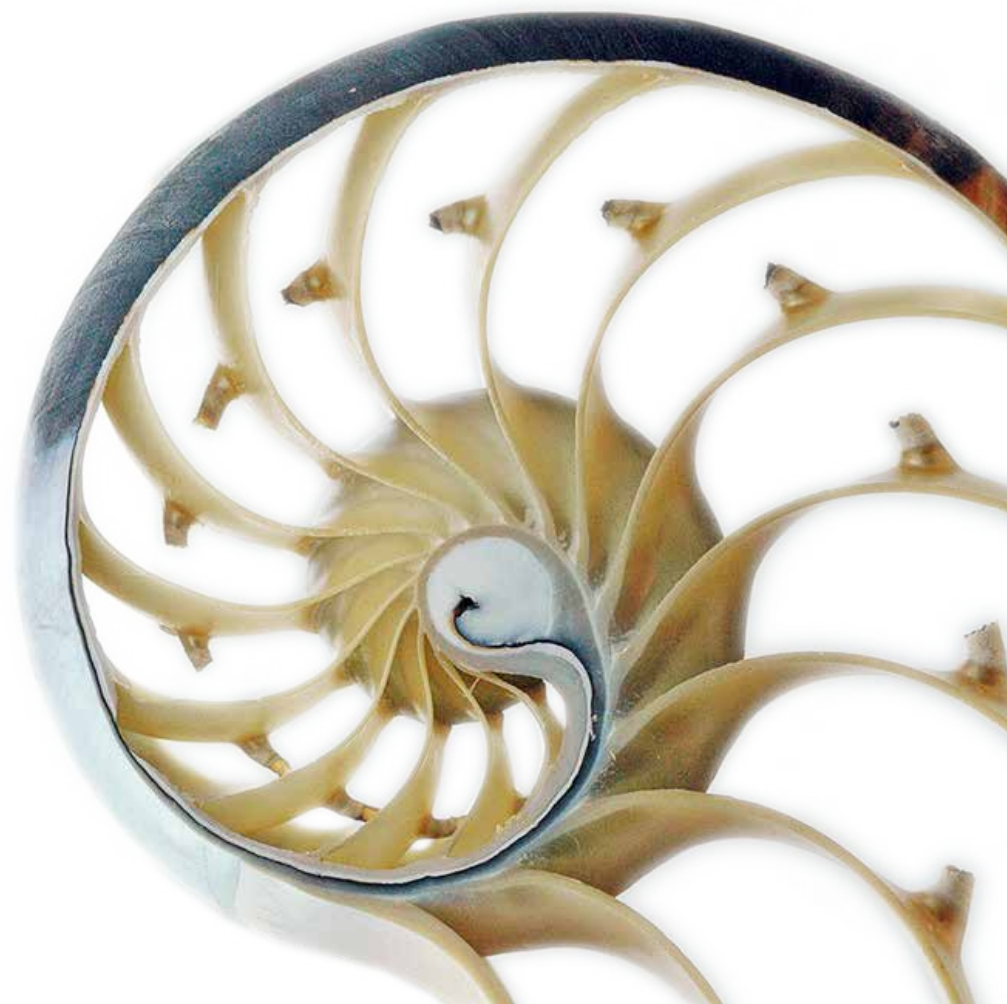
He believes that his work has helped M&E to become institutionalised in South Africa, something he is very proud of. "Awareness of M&E is very high in South Africa, and that is good. Quality is the next concern – our task at CREST now is to help the M&E industry professionalise and establish ways of getting accreditation."

In 2010, Mouton established the African Doctoral Academy at CREST, another proud achievement for him. The academy aims to assist current and prospective doctoral candidates from across the African continent to prepare for their doctoral studies and research careers.

Mouton has not neglected his own research during this time. Over the past 20 years, CREST has conducted more than 60 studies on the state of science and innovation in South Africa, the nature of the PhD, the careers and mobility of scientists and numerous other aspects of the South African science system.

Over this period, Mouton says that CREST has received more than R70 million in funding to support better research in South Africa and the continent. It remains the only centre conducting research on systems of science and research on the continent. In recognition of these achievements, it was made an DST-NRF Centre of Excellence in Scientometrics and Science, Technology and Innovation Policy in 2014.

Forty-four years on from his first reading of Plato, Mouton's passion for knowledge systems and the philosophy of science lives on through his students, his organisations and his legacy of improved research across Africa.



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# Legends of South African Science II

**Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf)**

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