WUR from within: straight, sharp, transparent

No 14

Resource

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The journalism platform about Wageningen University & Research

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more for teachers

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FOREWORD

Thorn in the side

'*Resource* is the feel-good advertisement machine of WUR.' That assessment comes from the latest issue of *The Jester*, WUR's independent student magazine. I always enjoy reading it for its sharp, engaged and witty content. But the latest edition takes *Resource* to task. After an analysis of our history – accurate as far as I can tell – the author wonders where all the critical journalists have gone. He refers to our editorial guidelines, which state that *Resource* is part of WUR's communications strategy. I cannot deny this, but I can share my experiences after three years as editor-in-chief. *Resource* is very much driven by journalistic values, we are serious about the content and there is no topic we avoid. Take our analysis of WUR's growth, collaboration with companies or with China, and the downsides of the Tenure Track. Yes, *Resource* does report news about passionate scientists, students and support staff. Even so, our science reporters and other editors are free to do as they want and they make good use of that freedom; we keep track, both formally and informally, of what goes on in WUR.
But I'll be honest: it hurts me to think our image could be that of a corporate glossy. Any science institution that takes itself seriously needs a thorn in its side. So here is a call to the *Jester* journalists and anyone else who cares about WUR: if there are topics you think we should be covering and aren't, let us know!

Willem Andrée
Editor-in-chief

ONE WORLD EVENING

On Monday evening, WagaStorm got the Superette swinging with a performance, karaoke and a quiz about Wageningen's LHBTQ scene. The evening was part of One World Week. Robert/GiGi, in the photo with red hair: 'WagaStorm organizes events where everyone is welcome. Our evenings offer a safe place where you are free to be whoever or whatever you want to be. You certainly don't have to come in drag! Although we do find that drag is a good way of getting a discussion going.' CJ

Photo Julia van der Westhuyzen

GroenLinks and PvdA win in Wageningen

GroenLinks and PvdA made the biggest gains in the municipal elections in Wageningen. Both coalition parties won two extra seats.

This brings the green party GroenLinks to eight seats. The party attracted just over a quarter of all votes, and now occupies almost one third of the 25 council seats.
In the wake of GroenLinks, PvdA (labour party) might be said to have done even better, capitalizing on its participation in the municipal executive by doubling its number of seats to four. This gain seems to have been at the expense of the third current coalition partner, D66. That party lost two of its seats and now has three seats.
The ChristenUnie, the fourth coalition partner, remained stuck at one seat. Other parties that retained their current number of seats were the VVD (two), Connect Wageningen student party (two) and the CDA (one). The SP, which previously had one seat, did not participate in the elections. The turnout of 60.1 per cent was slightly lower than four years ago (when it was 63.3 per cent).

Connect

Despite the stagnation in seat numbers, Connect attracted considerably more votes than four years ago: 1921 now as opposed to 1300 then. But this is not quite enough to gain the party an extra seat. Many of these votes (335) were cast at the polling station on the campus, where the party was the largest after GroenLinks (649 votes). RK

Three WUR students in council

Six of the eight parties in the election for Wageningen municipal council had WUR students among their candidates. Three students have been elected directly.

Photo Roelof Kleis

Food Technology Master's student Rosanne Groot (25) was second in the list of candidates for the green party, GroenLinks. The party did well, increasing its number of seats from six to eight. 'We're delighted with the result,' says Groot, who already has two years' experience in the council. 'We hadn't really expected it, but it shows all our hard work over the past few years has paid off. We're pleased with the support from the people of Wageningen, which will let us continue our work for the town in the coming years.' Groot wants to focus on the housing problem. 'We want to build more affordable homes and keep them affordable.'

'We hadn't expected it'

Melissa van der Lingen (23, BSc student of Management, Economics & Consumer Studies and Economics & Policy) was fourth on the list of the PvdA (labour party). The PvdA doubled its number of seats from two to four. 'We ran a great campaign with about 50 volunteers,' says Van der Lingen. 'We were aiming for three seats and got four, so I've been directly elected to the council.' Van der Lingen was previously a council member representing Connect Wageningen, with townspeople's mental health as one of her focus areas.
Landscape Architecture & Spatial Planning Bachelor's student Sarah Alen (20) headed the list for the youth party Connect Wageningen. Her party got two seats, the same as four years ago. 'But we're really pleased as we got a lot more votes. It was wonderful discussing things with so many people in the street and at the market.' But combining this with her studies made for a hectic period. 'I had a lot of excursions and then it was exam week. Now I need a bit of a break. The party has scheduled a spa day.' And down to work straight afterwards? 'We're due to start meetings this weekend. We'll see. I'm looking forward to it.' LZ

645

Tim van Loon (Education & Student Affairs) collected over six euros per kilometre for a good cause last Saturday. He ran the 103 kilometres between Wageningen and his parents' house in Breda to raise funds for Join Us, an organization that aims to alleviate loneliness among young people. He raised 645 euros and took 11 hours and 21 minutes to complete his first ultra run. RK

Scan the QR code for an interview with Van Loon.

Columnist wanted

Resource is looking for a new columnist! If you are a WUR employee who can write well and is willing to speak out about issues within the organization, then send an example column of 350 words to resource@wur.nl. Our team of editors will examine your text carefully and critically. There are 20 issues of *Resource* a year but the column is shared between three columnists, so you would need to write about six columns a year.

GREEN LIGHT

CHLOROPHYLL AND LIGHT AS OUR FOOD SOURCE GRANT TO WURKFORCE MUCH MORE GREEN IN SIGHT

Herscho Duds

62 million for photosynthesis

Private donors and WUR are investing a total of 62 million euros in a new institute for photosynthesis, it was announced during the *Dies Natalis*. Fifty million euros will come from private donors.

The institute has been given the working name Institute for Advanced Studies for Photosynthetic Efficiency (IASPE). 'Brand research is now ongoing to choose a new, definitive name,' says Van den Ende, director of the Animal Sciences Group and one of the instigators of the institute.

The aim is to double the yield of at least one crop in 10 years

The institute will be independent, but relies heavily on the input of WUR for the time being. There will be a board of directors, which WUR will be on, alongside the other investors. With the exception of the PhD students, the scientists and administrative staff will be employed by the institute.

The admin staff and postdocs will be located together, somewhere in an existing building on the campus. The PhD students will be employed by the WUR chair groups, where they will work. The postdocs will also do some work for the research groups.

Double the yield

The new institute's aim is to improve photosynthesis in agricultural crops. The specific target of the research is to double the yield per square metre of at least one crop in 10 years. How this is to be achieved and with which crop has not yet been decided conclusively. But various lines of research have already been worked out behind the scenes.

The sponsors are Menno Witteveen, Maarten Koopman and Egbert van der Pol, who have all been affiliated with WUR as sponsors for a long time. Witteveen and Koopman are partners in the investment company DIF Capital Partners. Van der Pol is a retired philanthropist. Never before has WUR received so much money from private donations. RK

See too the background story on the quest for the holy grail of photosynthesis (page 24).

Homepage for WUR scientists

WUR offers its scientists a lot of information that is useful for them in their day-to-day work as researchers, but that information is hard to find. SupHub, a new site to be launched next Monday, aims to solve that problem.

Which journal should you publish in to have maximum impact? Where can you find a drone to carry out measurements from the sky? All this information and more can in theory be found on WUR web pages. 'But some of the info is on the intranet, while other things are on the internet,' says Jacquelijn Ringersma, the Easy Service in Research programme manager at the library. 'It is a labyrinth.'

'The scope is that it should be for primary research'

She was commissioned by Dean of Research Wouter Hendriks to develop SubHub. It is basically a kind of homepage. Ringersma: 'We added a layer on top of the available services. Those services are divided into ten categories and there is a search bar. Once you find something, a link takes you to that location.'

Support

A total of 150 services were identified. Ringersma: 'The scope is that it should be a research support service for primary research.' The new portal has been tested with researchers. The address is suphub.wur.nl. The link to SupHub will be shown under applications on the intranet, and on the websites of the library and the graduate schools.

Strangely, there is already a Research Support page on the intranet, which has a very similar setup to SupHub. 'We did struggle with that dilemma,' says Ringersma. 'But SupHub offers a lot more services, is easier to search and will be kept up to date.' RK

Post-Covid education: less stress for students, more for teachers

Wageningen students were much more motivated at the end of period 3 of this academic year than in the first Covid year, when education was still almost entirely online. Moreover, the students reported significantly less stress than a year ago.

For teachers, however, the post-Covid picture is more complex. While they are a lot more enthusiastic than they were last year, they also reported bigger workloads and higher stress levels. The transition to blended education is good for morale, but does cause some extra headaches.

Work pressure

This picture emerges from a recent survey filled in by 300 lecturers and 500 students, which WUR hopes to use to extract lessons from the Covid period for the future education system at Wageningen. Dean of Education Arnold Bregt shared the preliminary results last week, in two short online sessions with interested teachers. It was suggested that it is hybrid education that causes the increased stress among instructors. 'Hybrid education is useful for students, but it means extra work for the teachers.' Kazem Banihashem, a postdoc in the Education and Learning Sciences (ELS) chair group and coordinator of this study, reports that it will shortly be followed up with interviews in which the additional stress among teachers will be discussed. The final report is expected in mid-June. ME

Wing case found

Around three weeks ago, Storm Eunice ripped a wing case off the artwork *Must Leave* in the Orion pond. It had been missing ever since. But a search operation in the pond by Professor Marten Scheffer, the man behind the beetle, and a team of volunteers was successful. The wing case was stuck in the pond bed a little further along. The beetle and its wing case are now doing well. RK ◆ Photo Ronny Rotbarth

Sadness about scientific boycott

'The majority of Russian scientists do *not* support Putin and are totally against the war. Please do not exclude them. They could really use your support right now.'

This emotional appeal came from two Russian WUR colleagues, after the Dutch universities heeded the cabinet's call to freeze all institutional scientific collaboration with Russia and Belarus. There is still plenty of room for personal contacts, according to a statement by UNL (Universities of the Netherlands), but these WUR colleagues say they see little evidence of this in practice. 'Russian scientists are in danger of becoming totally isolated. Their publications are being taken offline, the supply of materials and data has completely dried up, and long-standing international collaborations are terminated. What's more, people like marine biologists or soil scientists are being affected too. Whereas they have absolutely nothing to do with the war.'

'Russian scientists are in danger of becoming totally isolated'

Photo Unsplash/ Markus Spiske

The Dutch scientific boycott is a response to a letter from Russian university rectors, expressing their unconditional support for Putin. But, according to one of the Russian colleagues (who wishes to remain anonymous for fear of reprisals), these rectors are not representative of the Russian academic community. 'Thousands of Russian scientists have summoned the courage to sign a petition against Putin's state aggression. Some even demonstrate openly, although they face enormous risks by doing so. A Moscow State University alumna, who is also a mother of three, was arrested for demonstrating. The children risk being sent to an orphanage. And I don't know what is worse: a Russian prison or a Russian orphanage', she says with emotion in her voice.

What can or should the WUR community do to support peace-loving Russian colleagues? 'Don't 'cancel' your Russian connections completely. Understand how terrible it is to be caught up in such a dead-end boycott. Please don't abandon us, as we are standing for peace.' ME

More reflections on the Russian academic boycott can be found on page 18.

Vici grants for Poelman and De Smet

Entomologist Erik Poelman and chemist Louis de Smet have received Vici grants from the Dutch Research Council.

De Smet studies the removal of salts from water using electrolysis with the aim of extracting valuable resources from wastewater. His Vici research focuses on the use of nano-permeable materials for this separation process. How can you modify these materials so as to make them selective and able to deliver pure substances? Poelman studies the evolution of plants' defences against insects. Plants have to defend themselves against various different insects. What strategies do they use and how did this develop in the course of evolution? Poelman looks at wild plants to figure out that process. Vici grants are worth 1.5 million euros and are awarded to talented established scientists. RK

A Little Wiser

Why do men develop beer bellies?

A beer belly is more common among men than women. Why is that?

'The distribution of body fat is different in men than in women', says Edith Feskens, professor of Global Nutrition. The soft blubbery fat on women's buttocks, hips or abdomens is subcutaneous fat. Men, on the other hand, store fat deeper in the body, around the organs, and this is known as visceral fat. 'The difference is related to the sex hormones oestrogen and testosterone,' says Feskens. 'Women have a lot of oestrogen. From puberty onwards they not only store more fat than men, but it also ends up in other places. The subcutaneous fat, especially on the thighs and buttocks, provides a store of energy that a woman draws on during pregnancy and breastfeeding.'

So the more testosterone in your system, the greater the risk of a beer gut? It's not quite as simple as that, says Feskens. 'Testosterone makes for more muscle formation and less abdominal fat in men. As they get older, testosterone levels drop and men often go bald and develop a belly.'

In women it's the other way round: the more testosterone, the higher the risk of a beer belly. Feskens: 'During the menopause, oestrogen levels drop drastically, and testosterone becomes more dominant. As a result, the body develops a male fat pattern. That's why women have an increased risk of diabetes and cardiovascular disease after the menopause.'

There's a role for genetics as well. 'Your genes partly determine whether you store the fat under the skin or in the abdominal cavity. It is not always visible. You can have a very modest belly and still have a lot of fat around the organs.'

So a beer belly is mainly a matter of too many calories.

But does it have anything to do with beer? It does a bit, according to Feskens. 'Beer contains a lot of calories. Acording to the Netherlands Nutrition Centre, one beer contains about the same calories as a croquette. A study that we carried out a few years ago also showed that confirmed beer drinkers have a less healthy lifestyle than wine drinkers, for example. You often drink beer in larger quantities than other alcoholic drinks. And of course, alcohol makes you feel like snacking. Besides, in the Netherlands we usually drink alcohol in the evening, when your body uses up less energy'. TL

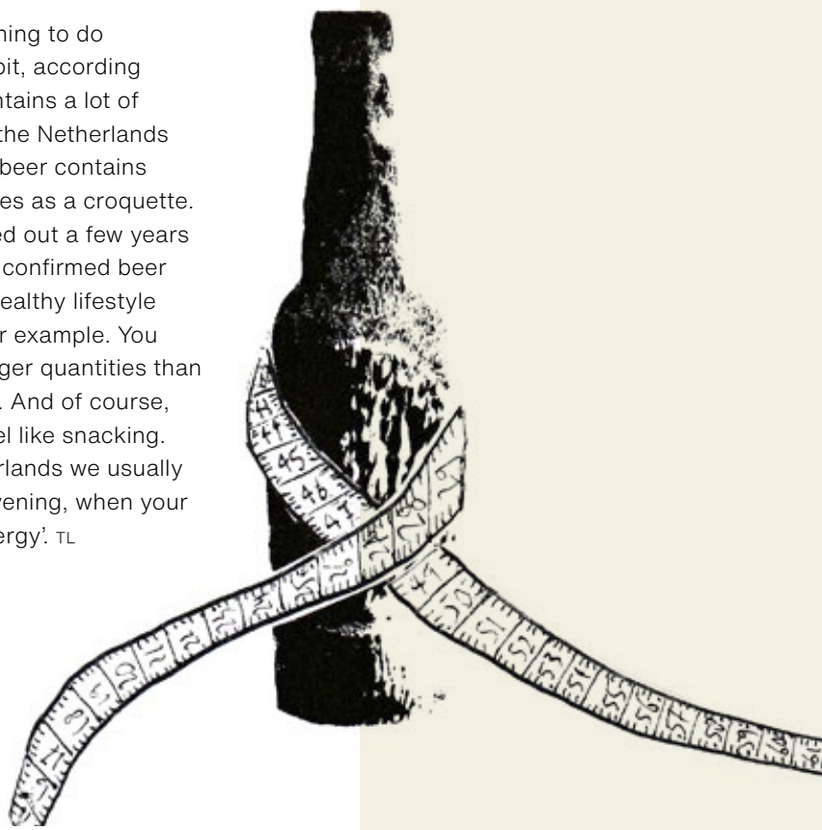
'Beer drinkers have a less healthy lifestyle than wine drinkers'

Edith Feskens, professor of Global Nutrition

Every day we are bombarded with masses of sometimes contradictory information on pressing issues. In this feature, a WUR scientist gives you something to hold on to. What are the facts of the matter?

Every question makes you a little wiser. Do you dare to ask yours? Email us at redactie@resource.nl

Illustration Marly Hendricks



Searching for micro weapons factories

Storm-van der Chijs prize winner Barbara Terlouw searches bacteria for new antibiotics.

Bacteria and fungi compete for food and manufacture antibiotics as weapons in that battle. We use the antibiotics to combat pathogenic bacteria, but these bacteria are increasingly becoming resistant. PhD candidate Barbara Terlouw (Bioinformatics) uses computer techniques to search the DNA of bacteria for new antibiotics.
'Proteins are the workhorses in all living cells,' explains Terlouw. 'So it is actually the proteins making the antibiotics in bacteria that produce antibiotics.' The proteins are like micro weapons factories. 'A protein functions like a production line where the various parts (domains) of the protein each add a component to jointly build an antibiotic.' Last month, Terlouw won a Storm-van der Chijs stipend for her research, alongside co-winner Katherine Barragán-Fonseca. The prize aims to help talented female PhD candidates in their scientific careers. Terlouw wants to use the stipend of 1500 euros to attend two international conferences in her field.

Uncharted territory

Terlouw focuses on Actinobacteria, a group of bacteria that is the source of two thirds of the antibiotics in use today. Modern techniques show that these bacteria can do a lot more than we realized. Terlouw wants to explore this uncharted territory. 'I go through large databases of DNA codes to determine for each protein domain which piece of antibiotic it adds. I've also written a machine-learning tool to train computers to predict what those pieces will be for each protein domain.' She eventually wants to be able to predict what as yet unknown antibiotic a bacterium can make based on its DNA code. SS

Hearing feel-good stories

A quick recipe for feeling happier is to listen to a story about nature, discovered Master's student of Biology Mirte van Balen.

It has already been scientifically established that being out in nature is good for our happiness. And related activities - looking at pictures of nature, listening to the sounds of nature - have been proven to make people happier. In the concluding phase of her internship with the online editorial staff of radio and TV programme *Vroege Vogels*, Biology Master's student Mirte van Balen took this a step further. She wanted to know whether listening to stories about nature could make people feel more positive too.
She investigated this question by asking readers of NatureToday's newsletter to fill in a questionnaire before and after listening to a fragment from *Vroege Vogels*. She used three fragments, which she had carefully stripped of the nature sounds, and divided them randomly among the respondents. In this way, she was able to measure the effect of the stories individually.

Cheered up by treecreepers

On average, the over 2000 respondents reported feeling significantly more positive after listening to the fragments. The story that most improved their mood was one about the nesting behaviour of treecreepers, followed by a fragment from the 'fenolijn', a phone-in line for listeners to report on interesting natural phenomena they've noticed. The third fragment, about how concern about climate change can lead to climate-related depression, had a much less cheering effect on the listeners. ME

Scan the QR code for the tree creeper fragment and the phone-in line.

Photo Rebeca Gonçalves

Cultivation on Mars

Growing different plants alongside one another gets better results than a monoculture. A trial by Master's student Rebeca Gonçalves shows this applies on Mars too. Last week she harvested tomatoes, carrots and peas from her experiment with Mars soil. The nitrogen-fixing peas enrich the soil with fertilizer. In the photo, the tomatoes from the monoculture on the simulated planet are on the right. RK

Use the QR code to read more about farming on Mars

How bacteria become resistant to antibiotics

Wageningen development biologists and German physicists have mapped the various evolutionary paths bacteria take in developing resistance to antibiotics.

The researchers placed the bacterium *E.coli* in 24 large test tubes and 74 smaller ones and added nutrients and an antibiotic. The bacterial populations in the large test tubes were 100 times bigger than the populations in the smaller test tubes. The bacteria started dividing and the researchers measured the mutations in the DNA and the resistance of the bacteria. Their first conclusion was that the small populations had about the same number of mutations as the large populations, but the large populations achieved levels of resistance that were about ten times higher.

Bladder infection

The researchers discovered this was because the type of mutation differed between the small and large populations. *E.coli* bacteria have two types of mutation that can make them resistant to antibiotics, says professor of Evolutionary Genetics Arjan de Visser. The first type is the point mutation, where a single letter in the bacterium's DNA changes. The second type consists of mutations in which pieces of DNA are deleted or copied in the genome. Most of the mutations in the large population were point mutations whereas the other type was more common in the small populations. Point mutations lead to much greater adaptation to the antibiotic.

The German physicists who De Visser collaborates with found an explanation for this difference with the help of machine learning. 'It is now clear that point mutations offer more advantages to bacteria but they are slow to occur and are therefore only seen in large populations,' reports De Visser in the journal *Nature Ecology & Evolution*. The large populations De Visser studied had 200 million bacteria, compared with two million in the small populations. By way of comparison, a urinary tract infection in humans involves billions of bacteria. AS

E.coli-bacteria • Photo Shutterstock

In other news science with a wink

THINK

Alcohol shrinks your brain. So does ageing. The effect of alcohol can therefore be expressed in terms of ageing. Studies by the University of Pennsylvania show that drinking a pint of beer or a glass of wine every day ages your brain by two years. The process starts with half a glass of beer a day and the effect increases exponentially with the consumption level. But what is wrong with getting older?

PURE

A couple of plants in a room can purify the air considerably, researchers from the University of Birmingham have shown. The most effect is achieved with the 'dragon tree' *Dracaena fragrans*. This plant reduces the amount of nitrogen dioxide (from car exhaust fumes, for example) in a room by 20 per cent. It can also withstand neglect, making it the perfect office plant.

10,000

For all those of you who are doggedly pursuing your daily quota of steps: you don't need 10,000 a day. A meta-study by the University of Massachusetts has proven this. For people over 60, 6000-8000 steps a day are enough to increase your life expectancy. And for young people, 8000-10,000 steps will do. Taking additional steps won't reduce your risk of death. The 10,000 steps myth came from Japanese pedometer marketers. And we walked right into it.

SPERM

Scientists at the Vancouver Prostate Centre have succeeded in printing a kind of testicle with a 3D printer. When stem cells were injected into the printed testicles, the cells grew into the precursors of sperm cells. The scientists hope to use this technique to remedy infertility in men who do not produce sperm (or not enough) themselves. So the first 3D-printed baby is on its way. RK

Photo Shutterstock

‘The intestines are exposed to bacteria at an earlier stage than is normal’

Breastfeeding good for premature baby’s gut

One out of 10 babies are born prematurely. Premature birth increases the risk of certain diseases and conditions, partly because the baby’s intestines are not yet fully developed. PhD candidate Jannie Henderickx studied the differences in the gut bacteria and fungi between premature and full-term babies.

Approximately 15 million babies are born before the 37th week of pregnancy every year. This is called premature birth. Not much research has been done on nutrition and intestinal development in premature babies, and yet it is certainly an issue: ‘The intestines are exposed to bacteria at an earlier stage than is normal,’ says doctoral candidate Jannie Henderickx (Microbiology). Henderickx studied the differences in the gut and microbiota between babies born prematurely and those carried to term. ‘The intestinal barrier, a protective layer between the intestine and the rest of our bodies, is still weak in premature children. This could cause a diminished resistance to disease.’ That can contribute to sepsis (blood poisoning) and necrotising enterocolitis (the death of intestinal tissue), the most common diseases affecting premature babies.

The doctoral candidate studied the babies’ faeces and stomach contents (drained through a feeding tube), looking for proteins and bacteria that are typical of the different developmental stages of the intestine. ‘We saw that certain proteins, such as mucine-5AC, are less prevalent in premature babies.’ These proteins may help form the protective layer in the digestive tract. Henderickx also saw that premature babies had fewer of the enzymes needed to break down breastmilk than did babies that were carried to term. As a result, they cannot benefit as much from breastfeeding.

Healthy chubbiness

The gut flora in premature and full-term babies differ significantly. Breastfeeding and the type of delivery (vaginal birth or caesarean section) affect the microbiota too. ‘A baby that has been carried to term, was delivered through the birth canal and is then breastfed is considered the gold standard in terms of microbiome,’ Hendrickx says. ‘That microbiome is perfectly suited to processing breastmilk.’

Breastfeeding stimulates the development of the baby’s immune system. Premature babies that are breastfed also have a higher level of *Bifidobacteria*, which are probably beneficial for the baby’s intestine. ‘*Bifidobacteria* convert certain sugars from breastmilk into short-chain fatty acids, that serve as food for other beneficial bacteria that strengthen the intestinal wall.’ Henderickx discovered that *Bifidobacteria* were related to a higher body weight, but were less prevalent in premature babies. A higher body weight in premature babies indicates good health.

Henderickx will graduates with a PhD for her research on 25 March. She will then start work at the Center for Microbiome Analyses and Therapeutics at Leiden University Medical Centre in Leiden. She hopes to remain involved in the planned follow-up research with Amsterdam UMC and Isala Children’s Hospital in Zwolle. In this study, researchers aim to study the digestion of breastmilk by the digestive tract and confirm the assumed link between proteins, *Bifidobacteria* and intestinal health. ss

The basic grant is coming back, but...

STUDENT DEBT WEIGHS HEAVILY ON 'UNLUCKY GENERATION'

From 2023, Dutch students will once again receive a basic grant. Meanwhile, over one and a half million people are currently paying off their student debt to the student finance organization DUO. Student debts running to tens of thousands of euros have become quite common. How does that happen? And how do you get rid of your debt? Will you still be able to buy a house? And will the new cabinet arrange compensation for the unlucky generation?

Text Bas Belleman (HOP) • Text boxes Emma Mouthaan • Photo Guy Ackermans

How do you end up with so much debt? You can borrow more than 500 euros every month, and more than 900 euros if you do not receive a supplementary grant. The extra tuition fee loan is currently 90 euros (tuition fees were halved because of Covid) and in normal years it is 180 euros. Suppose you borrow 1000 euros a month. If you do that for seven years - for example, to study medicine with a one-year extension – you can easily end up borrowing 84,000 euros.

And the outliers above 100,000 euros? To reach that level of debt, you have to make maximum use of all the possibilities, says a DUO spokesperson. For example, after high school, you can be on a vocational training course for years on end without obtaining a diploma, and then start an expensive private university course for which you apply for extra tuition fee loans (because you can). If you take out the maximum loan for years, your debt can mount up considerably. And if you never graduate, you have to pay everything back: your basic grant, your supplementary grant and your public transport pass.

Another important point is that the amount gets even higher if you don't

The highest student debt in the country comes to exactly 199,410 euros and 17 cents, according to DUO. But such a massive debt is an exception. A total of 1,560,289 students (at all universities and vocational training colleges) have a debt, and that is 220,000 more than in 2016. Nearly half are less than 10,000 euros in the red with DUO. Four per cent have less than 500 euros outstanding. On the other hand, 20 per cent of debtors (316,000 people) still have a debt exceeding 30,000 euros. And for 1000 of these, there is still more than 100,000 euros to pay off.

pay it off. You get additional fines and the bailiff comes calling. DUO cannot say anything about that highest debt of almost 200,000 for reasons of privacy, but this is roughly how it must have come about.

When the basic grant was scrapped, students started borrowing more: 600 euros per month on average. Not all students come knocking on DUO's door, though. With or without a basic grant, one in five students do not want to borrow. And yet high debts have become more normal and five years down the line, one in four first-year university students had a debt of more than 40,000 euros.

The average student debt – excluding non-borrowers – has increased by about 5000 euros to almost 30,000 euros. And these debts could rise further, as some of the students are still studying.

‘IF YOU GRADUATE AT 24 YOU CAN BE PAYING BACK UNTIL YOU ARE 66’

In debt until retirement

For how long are you burdened by your student debt? Here are the rules: You do not have to pay DUO anything for the first two calendar years after you graduate. You have up to 35 years to repay your debt and you are allowed to halt payments for a total of 60 months (five years) if you’re in difficulties. So that brings the total period to 42 years and a few months. For example, if you graduate at 24, you can be paying you’re your debt until you are 66. Only then is any outstanding sum waived.

So how much will you pay? At a zero per cent interest rate, it's simple. If you owe 30,000 euros, divide that by 35 x 12 months. That is 71.43 euros per month. But DUO takes your income into account. In this example, if you earn 40,000 a year before tax, the monthly repayment will be 10 euros lower, and if your income is 22,930 euros (that’s a bit more than 1,900 euros per month), you will pay nothing.

‘I FEEL I’VE BEEN SCREWED THREE TIMES OVER BY THE LOAN SYSTEM’

“THERE ARE NOW PEOPLE WHO DO NOT CONTINUE THEIR STUDIES BECAUSE OF THE COSTS’

And if you have a partner, both your incomes and both your student debts are taken into account.

Buying a house

It is often claimed that the new loan system means you can no longer buy a house. Is that true? Under the old system you could borrow money too. The conditions were less favourable then: you had to repay the debt with higher monthly payments within 15 years. Debts under the old system have twice as much weight in determining the maximum mortgage. An ‘old’ DUO debt of 10,000 euros reduces the mortgage you can get by 19,000 euros.

In the loan system (in place since September 2015) you don't receive a basic grant, but you can borrow under favourable conditions: you get 35 years to repay and your monthly payments are lower. So a debt of 10,000 euros means a maximum mortgage that is 10,250 euros lower. Those who need to borrow a lot of money are better off under the new system than under the old.

According to financial specialist Karin Boog of homeowners' association Vereniging Eigen Huis, student debt is a relatively minor problem compared to the rapid increase in house prices. Ten years ago, the average house cost 227,000 euros. ‘In the last few months of 2021, the average house price was over 438,000 and new builds are even more expensive,’ says Boog.

There is a solution: you can conceal your debt, since student debts are not registered with the Credit Registration Bureau. ‘Don't do that,’ says Boog. It is fraud and it can have consequences. Mortgage lenders can even make you pay off your mortgage at one go if they find out. You also lose the National Mortgage Guarantee (which provides help in case of payment problems for houses of up to 355,000 euros). Moreover, lenders increasingly often require their customers to reveal the amount of their student debt at DUO.

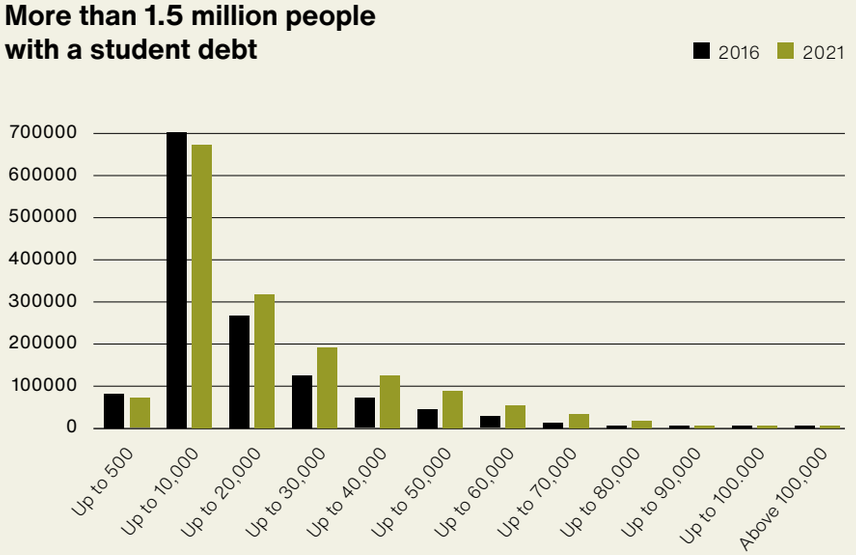
Politics

Opponents of the current loan system tend to blame the ruling VVD party: the conservatives are the only ones who still think the basic grant is nonsense and are not in favour of compensating ‘unlucky students’. But at one point, there was a majority in favour of the loan system. It was introduced in 2015 by a cabinet made up of the VVD and the left-wing PvdA, with the support of the then opposition parties, the liberal democratic D66 and the green GroenLinks.

For the VVD, it was a step towards the liberalization of education: you pay for it yourself and you profit from it yourself. For the left-wing parties, it was a question of levelling up: this way, less money goes to people who can in fact afford to fund themselves.

The centrist CDA has always opposed the abolition of the basic grant, but argued in the past for higher tuition fees (which almost comes to the same thing) and a ‘long extension penalty’ (increased tuition fees for students who extend their studies by more than a year). The

More than 1.5 million people with a student debt



Source: Student finance organization DUO.

loan system never became popular and GroenLinks was the first party to drop its support for it in 2019.

Compensation

As of September 2023, there will be a basic grant again. This will be a performance-related grant: you will only receive the grant if you graduate. The transition will be interesting. Suppose you are a first-year student now, what will happen in September 2023 when you start your third year? Will you receive a student grant for your last two years, or for all four years? Or nothing at all?
In the meantime, the students of the last few cohorts are glumly seeing how previous and future student generations benefit from grants, while they fall between two stools. On top of which, their university experience has been disappointing because of the impact of Covid-19. They want compensation, but the government is only talking about a modest 'concession' for which it has earmarked one billion euros.
Education Minister Dijkgraaf still has to work out the details of the compensation, but it will be between 1000 and 1500 euros per student. ‘Students for whom no basic grant has been available can choose between a reduction of their debt or a study voucher,’ says the coalition agreement. Even the most meagre compensation would cost 1.4 billion euros, officials have calculated, and the amount available is 400 million less than that. Student organizations are fighting for a better deal and Minister of Finance Kaag has not closed the door completely, so who knows what the future will bring. There is an additional concession, though, for the first four cohorts affected by the loan system: a study voucher worth 2000 euros which they can spend on additional higher education for five to ten years after graduation. ■

No worries

Susan van Weperen (23), an MSc student of Communication, Health and Life Sciences, has a smaller student debt than average.
‘I did my Bachelor's in Portland. I didn't have to pay anything for that because I got a full sports scholarship. That scholarship included housing and meals, so my costs were low. I was able to cover the costs I did have with savings from my high-school days and by working during the summer holidays. When I went to Wageningen for my Master's degree, my financial situation changed, of course. Now I borrow a small amount, and I try to make ends meet as best I can with my part-time job and the savings I have left.
I am very happy that the basic grant is being reinstated. Education should be accessible to everyone, regardless of your background and financial situation. Because of the loan system, that is not the case now, and yet education is a way of increasing equality and giving people equal opportunities. I can see that around me. There are people who don't continue their studies because of the costs. I also know people who are very worried about their high student debt.
I myself am not so worried about my student debt, because it is not that high. I also know that if something went wrong, I could fall back on my parents. But it’s not like that for everyone. Because you don't get a basic grant now, things like that increase the inequality between students.’ EM

Underestimated

Noortje (24), an MSc student of Food Technology, has a student debt of more than 50,000 euros.
‘Before I started studying, I figured out how much I would need to borrow every month to make ends meet. I looked at all kinds of websites to determine what the costs are for an average student. My parents paid for my room and gave me a monthly allowance. I didn’t have a job on the side during my Bachelor’s. I set my DUO loan at 700 euros per month. At the beginning of my student years, I didn't think my student debt would get so out of hand: I thought I would end up with about 40,000. But I wanted to do fun things, eat well and take longer over my Master’s in order to do two majors, so that increased my debt.
If there is fair compensation, I will be happy. I feel I’ve been screwed three times over by the loan system. Firstly, of course, I didn’t get a basic grant, while students before and after me will. Secondly, the promised investments in education haven't been made yet; by the time they will have been made, I will have graduated again. And thirdly, it was said that a student debt would not be taken into account in a mortgage application, but now it is. I therefore think that every student should be compensated to the tune of the basic grant they missed out on.’ EM

‘CONCEALING A DEBT IS POSSIBLE, BUT IT IS FRAUDULENT’

MODERN FORESTRY

Behind this bank along the Mansholtlaan, on land belonging to Droevendaal Experimental and Training Farm, a new wood is quietly being established. This is a food forest designed and managed by students. The starting point for the food forest is the farm's orchard. Hundreds of young trees were planted there recently, as well as on the bank intended to protect the wood from cold easterly winds and fine particles from the traffic that races past it. *Resource* will soon report in more detail on this inspired student project. RK

Photo Guy Ackermans

Academic boycott. Why only with Russia?

At the behest of the Ministry of Education, WUR, like other institutes, broke off research cooperation with Russia. When it comes to ‘rogue regimes’ and human rights violations, shouldn't we also be critical of scientific ties with countries like China? *Resource* asked around.

Text editing *Resource* ◆ Illustration Shutterstock/Larissa Mulder

Han Zuilhof
Professor of Organic Chemistry

‘Suspending research contacts can be effective temporarily, but research and sports exchanges are often the best way to keep in touch on “neutral territory”. Doing research together does not mean that you also agree or have to agree in other areas, as I see with my work in China or looking at the Olympic Games there. It only starts getting tricky when your research or your sport becomes part of the legitimization of dubious practices. If that doesn’t happen, it is one of the easiest ways for countries to keep talking. Above all, I would say, carry on seeing the potential in that: not talking is always worse.’

Fernando Gabriel García Teruel
Member of Student Council party Sustainability and Integration

‘I think that science should be about the search for truth and finding solutions to the problems we face as humanity. Scientific collaboration should therefore be above political interests. By collaborating, you can get a lot more done. So, as long as the goals and the ethical boundaries of the collaborating scientists and institutions are aligned, we should not be boycotting them for decisions made by others that they have no influence over. An ethical framework should be agreed upon by all sides, however, prior to collaboration. But if we start boycotting everyone for the acts of a few we will end up being just as totalitarian as the rest.’

‘You shouldn't curtail collaboration: in theory science is objective and value-free’

Maarten Jongsma
Plant scientist

‘Coincidentally, I had just completed an MTA (material transfer agreement) with a Russian partner to receive seeds and material for bioluminescent plants. That is off now: Legal Affairs is blocking it. A bit hypercorrect, if you ask me - and unnecessary. Previously, I worked on food projects in North Korea where, even in political terms, we always managed to distinguish between “the regime” and the population. I can understand that certain restrictions now apply to scientific cooperation with Russia. But I am not in favour of a total ban. A large proportion of Russian academics do not support Putin at all. And instead of isolating the Russian intelligentsia, we should continue to offer them opportunities to hear the Western narrative. Russians get to hear very different stories than the ones we hear. And we know what disinformation can lead to. In the lead-up to the Iraq war we fell for it ourselves.’

Chris de Visser
Field Crops business unit manager and a member of WUR’s China Platform

‘If you boycott Russia, there are a lot of other countries that you shouldn’t cooperate with scientifically. Where do you draw the line that defines the level of human rights violations at which you proceed to a boycott? I don't have a ready answer to that. I also think you’ve got to make a distinction between what a government does and what is good for the population and in the public interest. Food production is a basic need of every human being, regardless of the regime. So scientific cooperation in that field is important, I think, to improve agriculture and to help farmers and the population. I would understand, for example, if we decided not to support the Chinese government because of the violation of the human rights of the Uighurs in Xinjiang. But how well or badly agriculture functions in China can have major consequences for the world's food supply and related sustainability issues. That’s an issue we must take into account.’

Gerbert Roerink
An agricultural researcher and former coordinator of projects in Ukraine

‘I am against an academic boycott in general. Science is often the first and easiest form of cooperation between two countries. It can break the ice for further relations, so you shouldn't want to curtail that, especially since science is, theoretically, objective and value-free. At the same time, it is clear that “rogue” regimes are often inclined to garner Western knowledge for their own benefit; that the "cooperation" is in fact one-way - China in particular tends to do that. The key question is whether the world can move forward together towards peace and happiness for all, or whether we’re going back to large power blocs that oppose each other. I fear it will be the latter, a fear based partly on world history. And in that case, you do have to be cautious about completely open academic cooperation - not just with Russia, but with China too.’

What do you think of the boycott? Let us know at

resource-online.nl

Sjoukje Heimovaara, the new WUR president

‘I have become more idealistic’

The successor to WUR president Louise Fresco has been announced: Sjoukje Heimovaara (1965), the current director of the Agrotechnology & Food Sciences Group (AFSG). So the choice fell on an internal candidate. *Resource* met her to talk about issues such as the climate, the business world, and the institution’s future course.

Text Willem Andrée

As usual, the grapevine has buzzed with names of possible new WUR presidents. But not – at least, not to our knowledge – this one: Sjoukje Heimovaara. With this alumna, WUR says it has picked someone with ‘a clear vision, an open mind and a capacity to connect people.’ Heimovaara will start her new job on 1 July. She won’t discuss all the various dossiers until then. But we do get to meet her in Impulse, the prospective new president who is known as a people person, but also as direct, open and rational.

She kicks off by saying that it is very clear that WUR could take even more responsibility than it does for making the world more sustainable. ‘When you look at what we’ve got to do on the planet: make food systems sustainable, organize things sustainably nationally and internationally, improve the climate. These are major themes and WUR is in a unique position, which we can occupy with even more depth and breadth. I think we must make ourselves heard louder and clearer – within our mandate, of course. Because we are a research and educational institution. We offer facts and a direction to go in, and thereby possible solutions.’

Student days in Wageningen

The Wageningen alumna has fond memories of her student days. ‘A fantastic period. As a student town, Wageningen is on a manageable scale and there is a nice community where you don’t easily get lost. I was a member of Ceres student society – I lived in the student house called De Erwt – and I rowed with Argo for a year. I still know most of the words of the club songs by heart.’

So if you really want to be effective, you have to take a stand?

‘On some subjects, yes. If you ask me whether climate change is a problem, that’s not up for discussion. But more often, it is better not to take a position. I mean, we have the opportunity to offer options and guidelines, within our areas of expertise. Take the project ‘A natural future for the Netherlands in 2120’ in which ecologists and landscape architects from Wageningen have made a map of the Netherlands in 2120, envisaging a future in which nature comes first. We are not saying this is the only way to do things, but that these are possible directions to reflect on. It’s a way to get politicians thinking. We must do all we can to speed things up, but screaming and shouting won’t help.’

That is not your style?

‘No, I prefer to take a bit more time to think things over and then make sure the right information reaches the right people. And I believe in dialogue about our dossiers with the general public. I think it is our task – particularly that of the university - to share knowledge. Of course, we educate students, which is an effective way of sharing knowledge, but we also participate in debates. This is

already happening on an almost daily basis through Wageningen researchers in the media. As WUR, we can make a difference and that's what I want to support; working with everyone at WUR on societal issues such as food security and safety, the restoration of biodiversity, urbanization, climate change and adaptation, and making agriculture more sustainable.'

Are you an idealist?

'I have become more so over the years. But I'm not taking up the new post for my own sake; that's not what's important to me. We all work together: the entire Board, the Science Groups at the University, and the research institutes. One Wageningen: that is WUR's great strength. One of my priorities is to ensure that we are an attractive employer and educational institution. Are staff and students proud of our institution? I think we could present our green identity even more forcefully. We are too modest. WUR is the most high-profile education and research institute in the Netherlands. I want to keep it that way. Our people come here for research and education, and we must make sure that they can spend as much of their time as possible on those things.'

How do you view collaboration with the business community?

'It is essential that we cherish and protect our independence at all times. But if we as WUR want to maximize our impact for the world, we need to collaborate with the business community as well. People tend to think in black and white terms. We should give thought to who we want to collaborate with in pursuit of our mission. Sometimes it will be Unilever, sometimes the government, and sometimes an NGO. Of course there are dilemmas and it is important for us to be transparent and share our considerations, so that everyone can see them.'

Daughters and Finland

Sjoukje Heimovaara was born in the Netherlands, but has had a Finnish surname since she married a Delft professor from that country. They have three daughters: the eldest is doing a PhD in medicine, the middle one will graduate in civil engineering in April, and the third is in medical training. Lately, Heimovaara has been walking the Pieterpad long-distance footpath, and she likes rowing. She enjoys spending time with her family. And she and her husband can sometimes be found in Finland, where they have a house near the Russian border.

CV

Heimovaara studied Plant Breeding at Wageningen and obtained her PhD at Leiden University. She then worked at TNO for 14 years and at the plant-breeding company Royal Van Zanten for 17 years, most of them as R&D director with international responsibilities. Heimovaara knows the plant-breeding and research world like the back of her hand and for the last two years she has been getting to know the food world as director at AFSG. 'An ancillary position I set great store by is on the AWTI, the council that advises the government and parliament on science, technology and innovation.'

'WUR is the most high-profile education and research institute in the Netherlands. I want to keep it that way.' ◆ Photo Duncan de Fey

A round of responses

The appointment of a new chair of the Executive Board always elicits opinions. *Resource* sounded people out on and around the campus: what will Heimovaara have to offer us? Text Marieke Enter • Photo Duncan de Fey

Lidwien Poorthuis, managing director of LNVH (the national network of female professors)
'What struck me in Sjoukje Heimovaara's introduction was her commitment to listening. That is a leadership quality that is still very much underestimated, but is of great value - certainly when it comes to diversity and Recognition & Rewards. I also like the fact that she is familiar with science, business and civil society organizations. That breadth suits WUR and it benefits diversity too. And of course I applaud the fact that Louise Fresco's place in the Executive Board is once again occupied by a woman.'

Christa Testerink, professor of Plant Physiology
'Sjoukje was my co-supervisor when I did my PhD in Leiden in 2001; I was her first PhD student. Afterwards, we often met in the plant sciences world. I was delighted when she came to Wageningen, but that she will now be President of the Board is absolutely fantastic – and good news for WUR. Sjoukje is no-nonsense, positive and committed and she inspires people with great confidence. She also radiates "pleasure in science", and a sense that it is a privilege to do science. I am pretty sure she won't lose sight of the importance of super-fundamental science, alongside her attention to using science to help solve societal issues. I am sure she will be a president to be proud of. And I hope she will succeed in making WUR more diverse.'

Floor Vermeulen, Mayor of Wageningen
'When Sjoukje Heimovaara becomes President of WUR's Executive Board in a little while, we will share a brand and shape the city together. I remember how I went to the campus in my first week as mayor to meet the Executive Board. Let's turn that around now: I would like to invite Sjoukje for a walk around the city soon. Wageningen may not be new to her, but as we walk we can exchange ideas on how to shape life in the city together - including issues such as student housing and spatial planning.'

Tim van der Hagen, chair of the Executive Board and *rector magnificus* at TU Delft
'Sjoukje has big boots to fill, because Louise Fresco is of course a very strong president. But I know Sjoukje well – we are both members of the Advisory Council for Science, Technology and Innovation (AWTI) and we meet monthly - and I am convinced that she will do it with verve. Sjoukje is lively, humorous and approachable. And she is perfectly equipped for her new role, not least because she conducted a thorough study of the future of higher education on behalf of the AWTI. I am glad our ways will not part when I leave the AWTI this summer: we will continue to work closely together, but as fellow board chairs connected through 4TU (an alliance of Dutch technology-oriented universities, ed.) I am looking forward to that.'

Promotional magazine

Vincent Oostvogels

Have you read the latest *Jester*? You know, the student magazine that was set up a few years ago to offer an alternative angle to that of *Resource*. It recently landed on the doormat in our student flat. In a full-page article, it explained how *Resource* had become an uncritical promotional magazine for WUR - at least, in their eyes.
I am familiar with the narrative that *Resource* is not critical enough towards WUR, but the story in *The Jester* was largely new to me. It said that in 2008, *Resource* was in turmoil. The WUR Board was often unhappy with what was written and at one point even threatened legal action against a *Resource* columnist. Eventually, *Resource* – which had previously been published by an independent publisher – was incorporated into the Corporate Communications department at WUR and a new editorial statute was drawn up. *The Jester* quotes from it that *Resource*'s 'journalistic work cannot be distanced from the interests of Wageningen UR as a whole' and that *Resource* is 'part of WUR's communication strategy'.

'As a columnist writing from the sidelines, I have never experienced any limitations myself'

It is quite difficult to find out exactly what was going on at the time, but it's easy to download that editorial statute. I read it and I was really a bit shocked. Yes, it does also state that *Resource* serves as a 'forum for the diversity of opinions within Wageningen UR and as a platform for debate'. But overall, the document reads like that of a company that wants to control the content of its 'corporate magazine'.
Now you may say: there is nothing wrong with that. *Resource* is simply a corporate magazine. WUR pays, so it is logical that WUR has something to say about the content. Or you might say: it won't be that bad in practice. As a columnist writing from the sidelines, I have never experienced any restrictions; perhaps the same applies to the editors.
Nevertheless, *The Jester* is starting a relevant conversation here. And one that concerns us all. Because what *are* 'the interests of the university as a whole'? Sure, the Communications department may have certain interests. But one thing is certain: these are not automatically the interests of students and staff too.

What do you think? Resource-online.nl

Vincent Oostvogels (25) is in the first year of his PhD research on biodiversity restoration in dairy farming. He dreams of being able to keep a few cows himself one day.

Making better use of light-emitting plants

With a new institute on the campus and a load of money (see also page 5), scientists are going in search of the holy grail: improving photosynthesis.

Text Roelof Kleis

Photosynthesis is the engine of life on earth. This process in plants converts water and CO_2 into oxygen and carbohydrates, with the sun as its driving force. Could it be made more sustainable? Possibly, given that plants use only one per cent of the sunlight reaching them for their photosynthesis. If this could be done more efficiently, would trees grow sky-high? Louise Fresco thinks they would. She called improving photosynthesis the holy grail of agriculture back in 2015, during her first *Dies Natalis* as WUR president.

The reasoning is simple: with improved photosynthesis, plants would grow faster. Since the world's population is still growing, that sounds like music to our ears. But faster growth does not necessarily mean a bigger yield. 'The question is what the plant does with extra nutrients,' says René Klein Lankhorst, programme developer at the Plant Sciences Group (PSG) and leader of large projects on photosynthesis. 'Potato plants that are five metres tall but have small potatoes are of no use to you. So, in addition to photosynthesis, you need to influence a lot more processes that ensure that the extra energy produces more, larger or faster-growing tubers. Or, in the case of grain, more, larger or faster-growing grains. You have to fine-tune that for each plant.'

Not *Arabidopsis*

'This is the old Wageningen mantra, really: more production per square metre with less input,' says Ernst van den Ende. As the former director of PSG, he was closely involved in the creation of the new institute. 'The dot on the horizon is that in 10 years' time, the concept of better photosynthesis will have produced a food crop with a bigger yield per square metre. It also means that we will not spend 10 years working with the model plant *Arabidopsis*. We are starting a fundamental science programme knowing that the concepts being developed will translate into potatoes, tomatoes, grains, rice, cassava, and so on.'

Which plant is at the top of the wish list is not yet clear. 'We are thinking of the potato plant. You can get off to a flying start with the potato because we already know a lot about it. The private financiers focus strongly on Africa. The potato is an increasingly common food crop there. I think eventually we'll do both: we'll work on the potato, but in parallel programmes we'll show how the concept can be applied to certain tropical crops such as cassava.

We've got our ideas about research lines on paper. There has already been a lot of discussion, both within Wageningen and in the large European consortium, Photosynthesis 2.0. The ideas need to really crystallize in the coming months. The new scientific director will play an important role in this.'

Illustration Shutterstock

The mention of Photosynthesis 2.0 brings us to another big dream. It is under this banner that an international consortium operates, made up of more than 50 universities and institutes from 17 European countries. The collaboration was forged on the advice of senior EU officials. ‘When Louise (Fresco, ed.) talked about the holy grail of photosynthesis back then, we lost no time in going to talk to her,’ Klein Lankhorst says. ‘We said, if we really want to make great strides in photosynthesis, we must form a large consortium. Louise was on board straightaway and approached a senior EU official. He said, “‘Form a consortium and draft an initial research plan’.”

The aim was to participate in the EU’s FET Flagships programme. A flagship of European science is eligible for one billion euros in funding. The consortium was formed, but the big money has yet to arrive, says Klein Lankhorst. Funding was allocated, however, for photosynthesis research on a smaller scale in the Capitalize project, which seeks to improve photosynthesis through breeding. ‘And we received money for CropBooster-P, an international project to develop a roadmap for making crops future-proof. This will be an advisory report to the European Commission and I am the coordinator. The aim is to increase crop yields in a sustainable way. Our final report will be ready by the summer.’

‘If we really want to make great strides, we must form a large consortium’

‘You can get off to a flying start with the potato’

Social sciences

More efficient photosynthesis could be the kind of sustainable improvement that is needed. That it can be done more efficiently is demonstrated by plants like Mediterranean mustard. This plant converts five per cent of the sunlight that falls on it into nutrients. Scientists from Wageningen are busy figuring out how the plant does this. In fact, it was this research, already sponsored by the financiers of the new institute, that persuaded them to do more work on photosynthesis.

‘Once you know how a plant like this one achieves that level of efficiency, you have the key to the future,’ says Van den Ende. ‘Such lines of research will be pursued at the institute too.’ But he definitely does not rule out genetic modification (GM). ‘That’s a sensitive topic in Europe. My personal opinion is that the GM debate has been overtaken by scientific developments such as CRISPR-Cas. On the other hand, there is of course no point in working on innovations that society does not accept. For that reason, we shall involve the social sciences in the institute as well. Although our plans are by no means set in stone.’ ■

WUR PhD student shares house with two refugees from Ukraine

UNEXPECTED HOUSEMATES

More than tree million people have fled Ukraine since the war began. Among them, Anna (20) and her 'sister-in-law' Vira (17), who hurriedly packed some things, joined the queue at the border and arrived in Wageningen after a long journey. And so PhD student Miriam Kuspiel unexpectedly gained two housemates. 'Luckily I can afford to pay the rent on my own.'

Text Coretta Jongeling

Of course, they were following the news and had seen that tensions were rising between Russia and Ukraine. But Anna and Vira had never imagined that it would really come to a war and that there would be so much violence. Anna: 'It felt like I was in a film. When I woke up on 24 February, I had a huge number of messages from friends on my phone. Everyone was saying that the war had started. I couldn't believe it. I called my brother and it was only when he said it was true that the news hit me.'

Tanks

'The first few days were very stressful. Friends from Charkov sent photos of tanks and soldiers. We live in Chernivtsi near the Romanian border, quite a long way from there. But we had no idea what the Russian army would do and how far they would get. It felt so unreal. My birthday was two days before the war started. One moment I was making plans for my birthday party, the next I was helping refugees who had come to our city.'

'My first thought was: we have to get out of here. Then I realized that I would have to be fa long way away from my boyfriend and all my friends. And my grandmother, who has no passport, can't leave the country. Nevertheless, we decided to leave fairly quickly. The situation was very unpredictable. Friends were in air-raid shelters in the cold. There were news reports about girls being raped and killed.'

They made the decision at nine in the evening and left at six the next morning. Anna and Vira, Anna's boyfriend's sister, would travel together, without their parents, who wanted to stay behind for the rest of the family.

Anna: 'The journey was not easy. At the border there were queues that took hours. It was freezing, and there were lots of babies and young children crying constantly. When we arrived at customs, they refused to let us through. Priority was given to mothers with children. Only after long negotiations did they let us through, but then we didn't have time to give our mothers a hug. We said goodbye through the fence.'

Final destination Wageningen

They took the bus to Bucharest, where their flight would go from. The bus arrived just in time, but once again, immigration officials did not cooperate. Vira: 'According to Romanian law, I am not allowed to travel alone as a minor. We had written permission from my parents,

From the left: Anna, Vira and Miriam ◆ Photo Guy Ackermans

but that didn't help.' Long story short: they missed their flight, were able to fly the next day after a lot of talking, and finally arrived in Wageningen after a diversion via Vienna and Frankfurt. It was a logical final destination, because Anna's brother Andriy lives here and is doing a PhD at Wageningen University.

They lived with Andriy and his two housemates for the first few days, five of them in a small flat. Anna: 'When we were making dumplings for the fundraiser for Ukraine, my brother called on their neighbour, Miriam, to borrow a rolling pin. They got talking about our situation and Miriam told them she had a spare room in her flat.'

Miriam: 'It was an easy decision. I had planned to rent the room out to guest researchers, but fortunately I can afford to pay the rent on my own too. Many people want to do something to help, and this is what I can do.'

'I FIND IT VERY HARD TO BE HERE, FAR FROM FAMILY AND FRIENDS'

'WE SAID GOODBYE THROUGH THE FENCE'

Madmen

The girls can stay with Miriam least at least until the end of March. What happens after that is still very uncertain. Vira: 'I would prefer to go back as soon as I am 18. I find it very hard to be here, far from family and friends. But everything depends on how the war goes. Nobody knows how things will go, or what to expect. Nobody expected that some madman would start a war.'

Anna: 'At first I also wanted to go back and help people there. But now I realize that it's better to help from here. Here we can collect money and send it to people who need it in Ukraine.'

Meanwhile, life is starting to go back to normal. Anna: 'The head of our university told us we should just pick up our studies again. We are used to working online because of the pandemic, he says. We call him madman the second. Because who can concentrate on homework now? Studying was always the most important thing for me. I always got good grades. Now I can't imagine why I was so preoccupied with that. There are more important things in life now.' ■

Key people: Arie van den Dool

They are indispensable on the campus: the cleaners, caretakers, caterers, gardeners, receptionists - the list is long. *Resource* looks up these key people. This time, meet Arie van den Dool (63), on the facilities staff in Zodiac.

Text Susan van Weperen ◆ Photo Guy Ackermans

Arie will retire in June and say goodbye to Zodiac after working for Wageningen University for over 40 years. ‘I started working in Zodiac 42 years ago, looking after laboratory animals. I looked after the poultry and cattle until 2008. Then I switched to my current job as a facility worker. When I stopped working as an animal carer, a lot of people asked me if I missed the animals. I always jokingly said: "No, because now I know who the real animals are.”

As a facility worker in Zodiac I do all kinds of odd jobs. One day I’m assembling new office chairs and the next I’m getting meeting rooms ready and putting up whiteboards. So my work is very varied.

Before I started in Zodiac as a facilities employee, I was doing the same job in Axis for a year and a half. After those 18 months I returned to Zodiac, and I was happy about that, because I feel at home in Zodiac. There is a relaxed atmosphere here and my colleagues are a bunch of crazies; we’re always playing jokes on each other.’

Like this edition of Key People, for instance: Arie's colleagues tipped off the editors without him knowing about it. That’s no problem for Arie: 'We often joke with each other, so you can expect things like this.’ Now that Arie is retiring, he will miss these jokes. ‘It’s always fun in Zodiac, but now it is time to enjoy some peace and quiet and spend more time with my family. I will move to Vlissingen, closer to my children and grandchildren. Of course, everyone who knows me knows that I won’t sit around and that I will go and work somewhere as a volunteer. And I will find people and sociability there too.’

‘I feel at home in Zodiac’

Flavours of WUR

Gnocchi della Val Varaita

All the flavours of the world can be found in the WUR community. Marta Nidola, a Master's student of Geo-Information Science, takes us to Italy.

Ingredienten (for 4 persons):

- 1kg potatoes
- 350g plain flour
- 400g '*tumin del mel*`, a fresh cheese
- 2 eggs
- Salt

With this recipe, I honour my grandma, who passed away some weeks ago while I was in Wageningen. For me, gnocchi della Val Varaita brings back memories of carefree summer vacations spent in Melle (population around 300) with my cousins, enjoying simple things.

1. Boil the potatoes in their skins.
2. As soon as they are cooked through, peel and mash them. It is important to do this while they are still hot! You could peel them first, so as not to burn your fingers, but that is not advisable since it will make the potatoes absorb more water.
3. Put the grated cheese in a bowl and tip the mashed potato into it. Mix as necessary to make sure the cheese melts completely.
4. Add the eggs, flour and a pinch of salt, and stir well. Then knead the dough until it forms a firm, compact ball.
5. Take some of the dough and roll it between your hands. Then cut it into smaller or larger pieces, depending whether you like the long 'ravioli' or the smaller 'gnocco' shape. Form the dough into the shape you want by rolling it between your hands.
6. Place the gnocchi in boiling water and scoop them out with a slotted spoon as soon as they float.
7. Serve the gnocchi straightaway, covered in tomato sauce and sprinkled with grated Parmesan, or '*in bianco*' (a fondue made with cream and cheese).

Marta Nidola
Master's student of Geo-Information Science, from Italy

UNIque houses

There are student houses and there are weird and wonderful student houses. In this column we visit the latter. This time: De Kogel (The Bullet).

The Bullet

Residents:
Bram, other Bram, Bauke, Dirk, Gerben, Hodor, Jelle and Steven.

Unique because:
only Ceres men live here.

Jelle: 'The house used to be in the Bergstraat, opposite the church. When the first down payment was made on the property, the decision was made, and that's where the name De Kogel comes from.' (There's a Dutch saying about a bullet hitting the church, used when a decision is made, ed.)
Jelle: 'Here at the dyke we have a large back garden, where we've always kept animals, actually. There on the wall hangs a photo of Frans the pig, who lived here for ten years.'
Gerben: 'After that we had goats, but sadly they were moved to a petting zoo, so now we're thinking of getting another pig. Or maybe two. We tend to follow the motto 'where there's a will, there's a way'. So if you want something, it ought to be possible. We have a lot of freedom here. It means the living room can be quite a mess, but mostly there are a lot of good sides to it'.
Steven: 'We don't have a landlord, so we can do whatever we want. If we want to expand, we can. Okay, the municipality does have a say in things, of course.'
Jelle: 'Because we own the building, we do most of the odd jobs ourselves. For example, Bram and I installed the heating in the attic together, although we had never done it before and had no idea how to do it. We managed it in the end.'
Jelle: 'An important moment in the year is the Christmas dinner. Then we hand in all our saved-up beer crates to collect the deposit. How much we can spend depends on how much we have drunk. The first-years have to brew their own beer for the Christmas dinner, on a cooker like this one, without measuring the ingredients properly... And at Christmas comes the moment when we get to taste it. It has gone wrong every time for the past few years, actually.'
Hodor: 'Every bottle was unique. Mine was really good though.'
Jelle: 'He had made it and he is just too stubborn to admit that it was a failure.' cj

If you too want your UNIque house in *Resource*, send an email to resource@wur.nl

From the left: Bram, Gerben, Jelle (with cap), Hodor, Steven and Dirk ◆ Photo Guy Ackermans

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WUR from within: straight, sharp, transparent

Colophon

Resource is the independent medium for students and staff at Wageningen University & Research. *Resource* reports and interprets the news and gives the context. New articles are posted daily on resource-online.nl. The magazine is published every fortnight on Thursday.

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Bubble

‘Lots of people in Wageningen are involved in things like climate change, sustainable agriculture and nature conservation through their study or job. I’ve been living here for four years and I’ve got used to this “Wageningen bubble” where a sustainable life is normal. But when I’m back home, I see that people in the rest of the country aren’t at all interested. Friends even tease me about my “ideals”. How should I deal with this mismatch?’

M. de G., student
(name known to the editors)

Patience

‘Many people care about topics such as sustainability and climate change but don’t feel a personal responsibility. It *is* difficult as people are used to a life with cheap meat, fossil fuels and cut-price plane tickets. In practice, the transition to a sustainable lifestyle often means doing without luxuries or paying more. That’s why the transition is going slowly, but it *is* happening! Keep sending a positive message about your ideals and be aware it will take time. It certainly won’t do any harm to set a good example and have proper discussions. In your discussions, put yourself in the other person’s place and don’t force the issue.’
Henrieke Bruins, brand manager

Candid discussions

‘This question shows just how important it is to discuss these issues outside of Wageningen. It’s great you are doing that but I can imagine it can sometimes be a problem with friends. You should stress why these ideals are so important to you. Your friends are undoubtedly interested in that. Ask them what’s important to them but avoid making them feel they ought to adopt your ideals. That will only make them dig their heels in and put an end to such candid discussions.’
Jasper van Ruijven, assistant professor of Plant Ecology and Nature Conservation

Don’t try to persuade

‘As a vegan with a gluten intolerance I am not the easiest dinner guest, especially back home where most of my friends still see meat as the main part of the meal. When going for dinner somewhere I always tell the host my dietary wishes and stress what I do eat. I never try to convince others to stop eating animal products. If asked, I simply explain why I made that decision. I use the same strategy for dealing with other topics like waste management. It doesn’t stop me being made fun of occasionally, but I couldn’t care less.’
Heleen Aalderink, Bachelor’s student of Soil, Water, Atmosphere

Use the knowledge

‘I experience the same gap between people from my hometown and Wageningen. I advise you not to try and convince other people of your ideals. Instead, listen to what they have to say and use that knowledge here in Wageningen to improve communication between our bubble and the rest of the Netherlands (and the world).’
Martijn Smakman, Bachelor’s student of Landscape Architecture and Planning

NEXT WURRY

Impersonal desks

‘We are hot-desking more and more, which makes the workstations less personal and in my opinion less welcoming. Has anyone got any tips on how to liven up the office and make the desks and work areas more welcoming?’

Arjan Cuppen, WUR employee

Do you have advice or tips for this WURrier? Or could you use some good advice yourself? ***Email your tips or your question (100 words max) by 1 April to resource@wur.nl*** *subject noWURries.*