

## Interview with Louise Fresco

## ‘We are here to make a difference’

Louise Fresco, president of Wageningen UR since July, has returned to her Alma Mater after 17 years to find a lot of highly motivated people on a beautiful campus. Dialogue with the wider society is needed, believes Fresco, but so is more internal collaboration between science groups. She wants to forge connections. ‘Connecting is the story of my life.’

**text:** Albert Sikkema en Edwin van Laar / **photo:** Harmen de Jong

**W**e met her two days after the opening of the academic year. Relaxed, she poured the tea. ‘Let’s keep it informal’.

***What did you notice most when you returned to your alma mater?***

‘First of all, the campus. It has a tremendous charm. I see students sitting about on the grass with a book – lovely. And as a researcher you can have direct contact with colleagues in other groups. The campus has great potential for exchange and collaboration. The second thing that struck me is how nice the people are here, and how clever and motivated. I had forgotten, but it is far from being a cynical organization. We are here to make a difference, and that is what drives people. Wageningen types see that kind of intrinsic motivation as only normal, but you should keep on reminding each other about that strong point.’

***When you worked here as a researcher, DLO was still a separate organization. What is your take on that?***

‘The integration of the university and DLO to form Wageningen UR was a good development. Both parties would have been in a worse position now if that step had not been taken. And the combination is unique in the world. But I don’t think the integration is complete yet. I would like to see more people from DLO contributing to the education programmes. At the moment that is difficult because of administrative rules. And why can’t more students do their final research projects in DLO? It is a terrific advantage that we can translate questions coming from the field into fundamental research.’

***The concept of Wageningen UR is confusing to outsiders.***

‘That is true. At the moment I explain what Wageningen UR is about 10 times a day, telling people we don’t have just the university, but the DLO institutes as well. To me the important thing about that is that we are all focusing on society’s issues, which is what motivates the

fundamental researchers here too. We need to tap into that strength more. There’s a reason why I didn’t wear an academic gown for my speech at the opening of the academic year. I am here for everybody, including DLO.’

***You said in your speech that you want more collaboration between the natural sciences and the social sciences.***

***What are you aiming at?***

‘I see Wageningen scientists collaborating well within their science groups, but between the groups the collaboration leaves something to be desired. All the big issues in our domain have something to do with plants, animals, the environment, nutrition and society. As an overall organization we do not yet think in interdisciplinary terms. I think we need to join forces on the cutting edges of the science groups, seeing our research as a contribution to the whole.’

***You also say in your speech, ‘open your minds’ and ‘we need a greater diversity of minds’. Is Wageningen too inward-looking?***

‘Research has shown that diversity has great advantages for teams. What I have in mind is not just diversity of gender and culture but also of age and experience. You need a range of people and backgrounds, and reproducing received opinion is deadly for a scientific institution. My advice to students is: look for those different perspectives, don’t just stick with your own kind. But I have human resource policy in mind too. We will soon be getting our first immigrant professor. We must create an atmosphere in which there is room for a range of different points of view.’

***Is this diversity instrumental for your wish to strengthen dialogue with society?***

‘It is more than an instrument, it is formative for yourself as a person too. When I was working at the FAO in Rome I had to lead four Islamic directors and my immediate boss was a Muslim from Senegal. That was an

**‘Don’t just stick with your own kind’**

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enriching experience for me personally. You can find diversity in books, films and art as well. The main thing is to learn to think from someone else's point of view. Reading books is good for your creativity too.'

### ***OK, so what about society. Who is society?***

Fresco takes a piece of paper and draws a round table. 'So you want to get various groups around the table, such as farmers and market gardeners, consumers, small and medium-sized business people, multinationals, the government, critical scientists and campaigners.' As she speaks she draws seven circles around the edge of the table, because each of those groups are engaged in their own internal dialogue. 'These groups have some of their knowledge in common, but not all of it. So what you must not do is tell them how things are and what they should do. No, you need to get a discussion going, and to listen and to acknowledge the emotions involved. Where do those emotions come from? What you want is continuous dialogue, not just once every six months.'

### ***How do you intend to deal with sceptics?***

'Not by banging on about the scientific truth. No, make the arguments clear. But another thing is: where do the pessimism and the fear of innovation come from? My guess is that insecurity about our future feeds that pessimism. Perhaps science can reduce that insecurity.'

### ***What hot issues do you want to talk about? Genetic modification?***

'In the coming months we are going to think about what would be good themes. Genetic modification is not the first thing that occurs to me – that is too complicated to take on first. I think more in terms of obesity, or an issue related to the nature and environment side of things. A theme involving lots of points of view, which a lot of different groups have an opinion on and on which the scientific community does not take the same line. You know in advance that science cannot come up with the ideal solution. That is impossible, because it's a question of weighing up different considerations all the time. Society has to make choices and science can help by providing options. I want to get involved in that process.'


### ***Researchers are assessed on publications and productive hours worked. Do people have time for a dialogue with society?***

'What I said in my speech is input for the strategic plan we are now drawing up. If we see that dialogue as important we must make time for it. I am not suggesting you should then say to everyone: spend five hours a week



on dialogue. My idea is more that directors should take that role into account in their staffing policy, and encourage people who are good at it to do it. And I am not just thinking of round table discussions. Two weeks ago I was at the potato demo day, which was a dialogue with society too. Or it might be a film in which you expose and discuss the ambivalence about a societal theme. It's about making connections.'

### ***Connections?***

'Yes, I was already working on that as a student, a researcher and a professor at Wageningen. Connecting is the story of my life. I was on the Social and Economic Council, with employers, employees and members appointed by the crown, but civil society organizations were not represented. Our polder model of consensus-based consultation is not participatory enough. We still need more consultation in the Netherlands.' 

**Louise Fresco: 'Society has to make choices and science can help by providing options. I want to get involved in that process.'**